

## Poetic Style and Poetic Sources in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Common Stock Annals

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This article explores the evidence for the use of Old English poetry as a source in the annals of the common stock of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (to c. 892). The possibility that the compilers of the Chronicle either directly or indirectly derived information from vernacular poetry for entries of the late fifth and early sixth centuries was first raised by Henry Sweet. This essay reviews Sweet's argument and widens the exploration of the annals, including the Cynewulf and Cyneheard episode in annal 757, for features such as alliteration and poetic vocabulary, suggestive of poetic sources and style.

**Keywords:** Anglo-Saxon Chronicle; Old English poetry; Henry of Huntingdon; Hengest

The possibility that poetic sources may have provided information for early West Saxon history in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was first advanced by Henry Sweet (1879). Since the late nineteenth century there have been numerous discussions of both the sources of the common stock annals—that is the annals shared substantially by all versions up to c. 892—and the use and character of poetry in the annals.<sup>1</sup> The study of poetry and poetic style in the Chronicle, however, has almost exclusively focused on annals of the Chronicle continuations, beginning with annal 937 (*The Battle of Brunanburh*). The present study examines the evidence for the direct or indirect use of poetic sources in the making of the annals of the common stock. These annals were written by at least two different authors sometime before the first circulation of the Chronicle's annals c. 892. In a number of ground-breaking studies, Janet Bately (1978) has identified the major sources used in the compilation of the common stock annals, as well as distinguishing, largely on the basis of vocabulary evidence, between the contributions of at least two different authors who contributed annals. It is useful to call these two authors the first compiler, who wrote annals up to at least 860, but perhaps as far as annal 865, and a second chronicler, who interpolated a great amount of material into the first compiler's annal for 757 (dated 755 in all versions), as well as intervening in annal 855 as it is found in all Chronicle versions.<sup>2</sup> This second chronicler also wrote the annals from c. 867 to c. 880, describing the first decade of King Alfred the Great's reign; it is almost certain that these annals were written

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<sup>1</sup> Plummer (1952) formats seventeen passages as verse, while Dobbie (1942) includes only six poems on the criterion that only these have “sufficiently regular meter” (xxxii); Bredehoft (2001, 72–118) discusses the problem of classification. On the Chronicle's sources, see Bately (1979a; 1979b).

<sup>2</sup> The authorship of contribution(s) after c. 880 is difficult to determine; see Bately (1985).

as a block after 880; it is logical therefore to assume that his interventions in earlier annals also date from this time.

It is very unlikely that the first compiler and the second chronicler worked together, so that when looking for the sources of the Chronicle's annals it is important to distinguish between their different contributions, insofar as this is possible. The first compiler used a range of sources, some of which are easily identifiable, such as the chronological Epitome at the end of *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (V.24), regnal lists and genealogies from across the English kingdoms, and a group of sources providing information about world history for the first century AD. Other sources used by the first compiler are more difficult to identify, especially those for English history from the mid-fifth century to the end of the sixth, but it is highly likely that he drew on annalistic records in the shape of (or derived from) Easter Table annals. The second chronicler's sources are not easily defined, though it is very likely that for the recent events of the 870s eyewitness accounts supplied most of the information, though written records may also have been employed. Poetic elements in this author's contributions more likely indicate his own style than the use of poetry as a direct or indirect source. I first review Sweet's argument for a poetic source for annals about early Wessex. After this I will look at the evidence provided by the *Historia Anglorum* of the twelfth-century historian Henry of Huntingdon for an Old English poem cataloguing battles from the seventh to the early ninth centuries, and consider the implications of this evidence for our understanding of the possible sources used by the first compiler. Finally, I will examine the annals and interventions of the second chronicler, focusing in detail on his contribution to annal 757 and the evidence of poetic vocabulary that it presents.

## Early annals

Sweet's short note takes as its starting point comments by John Earle in his edition (1865) concerning the Chronicle's sources for early West Saxon history across the period 455 to 634. The starting point of this period, 455, pertains to the earliest Chronicle entry about the *adventus Saxonum* that is not reported in *Bede's Ecclesiastical History*, and its terminus is the beginning of the conversion of Wessex to Christianity, and with it the possibility of written records there. Sweet quotes Earle: "No general assertion can be made concerning the historical quality of this section: each clause must be estimated and valued for itself. Some parts are pure dream work, while others have a historical and trustworthy appearance. These prevail more and more towards the close of the period" (Earle 1865, x). For those elements in the Chronicle's record that are not derived from Bede, Earle suggests the possible influence of "oral traditions" and "bardic memory" used in conjunction with "the roll of kings" (1865, ix). While there is no doubt that regnal lists were an important source of information for the first compiler, the relationship of this type of record to other sources used is complex.

Sweet points to two entries in which he discerns a "distinctly poetical character" (1879, 311). These are annals 473 and 584 (Bately 1986, 18, 24):

473 Her Hengest 7 Æsc gefuhton wiþ Walas 7 genamon unarimedlico herereaf, 7 þa Walas flugon þa Englan swa þær fyr. (In this year Hengest and Æsc fought against the Britons and seized incalculable booty, and the Britons fled from the English there like fire.)

584 Her Ceawlin 7 Cuþa fuhton wiþ Brettas in þam stede þe mon nemneþ Feþanleag,<sup>3</sup> 7 Cuþan mon ofslog; 7 Ceawlin monige tunas genom 7 unarimedlice herereaf, ierre he hwearf þonan to his agnum. (In this year Ceawlin and Cutha fought against the Britons in the place called *Fethanleag*, and Cutha was killed; and Ceawlin captured many towns and incalculable booty, angrily he returned to his own.)

Sweet (1879, 311) notes that some elements of these passages, notably the use of simile and the attribution of emotion, “stand in strongest contrast to the historical and purely genealogical entries” and that the information in them goes well beyond providing names and facts, as most entries for this period (and later ones) generally do. Sweet suggests a poetic origin for both entries, and suggests that they have “preserved their original form almost unaltered, the original alliteration being clearly discernible” (311). He formats these lines as follows:

unárímedlico herereáf.  
 flugon ðá Englan swá fyr.  
 Ceáwlin ond Cúða.<sup>4</sup>  
 ierre hé hwearf ðonan tó his ágnum.

Sweet’s suggestion that these lines preserve original poetic metre and also that the “diction is strikingly poetical” (311) both require investigation employing tools that were not available in 1879. The term with the strongest claim to poetic usage is *ierre* (*yrre*) in annal 584, used widely in poetry and included by C. W. M. Grein in his *Sprachschätze der Angelsächsischen Dichter* (1912, 854). The compound noun *herereaf* is one of many poetic compound nouns with *here-*, and is included by Grein (1912, 334). Though there are only two poetic examples of *herereaf* (*Exodus* 583; *Judith* 317), beside numerous uses in later prose, these do not negate the poetic character of the term, especially if we are considering the possibility of an ultimate source dated to the sixth- or seventh-century (*DOE*, s.v. *herereaf*). The verb *fleon* (pret. pl. *flugon*) is also included by Grein (1912, 200), though the number of poetic uses is small in the context of c. 650 instances noted by the *Dictionary of Old English*, the vast majority of which are prose (*DOE*, s.v. *fleon*). The noun *fyr* has even more uses (c. 1625), again with the vast majority in prose, but is also listed by Grein (1912, 235–36). The close association of poetic vocabulary with alliteration justifies the suspicion of a poetic source (or sources), perhaps indirectly, behind these annals.

However, Sweet’s suggestion that these lines preserve original metre is problematic. His note appeared fifteen years before Eduard Sievers (1893) published his now largely accepted classification of Old English verse lines. While the group “Ceawlin and Cuþa” could be read as a Sievers A type verse, “flugon þa Englan swa [þer] fyr” stretches the possibilities of an E type, as does “ierre he hwearf þonan to his agnum.” The phrase *unarimedlico herereaf* is metrically problematic, though if we imagined these two words

<sup>3</sup> Whitelock (1961, 14 note 2) points out this place name is used in the twelfth century for a location near Stoke Lyne in north-east Oxfordshire. Sims-Williams (1983, 29–30) expresses some doubt that the battle took place. The etymology of *feþan-leag*, “the place of the soldiers,” could suggest the place name came first, and the attribution of a battle there later.

<sup>4</sup> Alliteration on names is common among the annals, and in isolation cannot be treated as a significant indicator of alliteration in a possible poetic source.

to be decayed remnants of two half-lines, then Old English verse might be perceived behind this collocation.<sup>5</sup> It is nevertheless noteworthy that this phrasing is repeated in both annals 473 and 584 in a formulaic context: “7 genamon unarimedlico herereaf; 7 unarimedlice herereaf [genom].”

A number of other annals among those for the earliest period (455–634), not noted by Sweet, contain elements also inviting the possibility of possible poetic origin. The first of these, annal 457 (like annal 473), names Hengest as a protagonist (Bately 1986, 18):

Her Hengest 7 Æsc fuhton wiþ Brettas in þære stowe þe is gecueden Crecganford 7 þær ofslogon IIIIm wera, 7 þa Brettas þa forleton Centlond 7 mid micle ege flugon to Lundenbyrg.

(In this year Hengest and Æsc fought against the Britons in the place that is called *Crecganford* and there killed four thousand men, and the Britons abandoned Kent and with great fear fled to the fortress of London.)

A few lexical items can be noted. The first is *wer* (“man”),<sup>6</sup> beside *mann/monn* (pl. *menn*). The noun *wer* is included by Grein, but while it has strong poetic connections, it is also used extensively in prose, including Alfredian prose (Grein 1912, 781; Healey et al. 2009). Similarly, *ege* (“fear”) is used in poetry, and also widely in prose (Grein 1912, 157; *DOE*, s.v. *ege*). The verb *fleon* has been discussed in relation to annal 473. The alliterating group “gecueden Crecganford” produces an acceptable A type verse, though *IIIIm—feowerþusend*—is too greatly separated in the annal from *flugon* for us to discern any evidence for direct borrowing from verse in their alliteration; the same is true of *forleton* and *Lundenbyrg*. More significant alliteration is found in annal 465, which again involves Hengest (Bately 1986, 18):

Her Hengest 7 Æsc gefuhton uuiþ Walas neah Wippedesfleote 7 þær XII wilisce aldormenn ofslogon, 7 hiera þegn an þær wearþ ofslægen, þam wæs noma Wipped.

(In this year Hengest and Æsc fought against the Britons near *Wippedesfleot* and killed twelve British leaders there, and a thegn of theirs was killed there, whose name was Wipped.)

The alliteration of *Walas*, *Wippedesfleote*, *wilisce* and *Wipped*, accompanied by stylistic alliteration incorporating the unstressed words *wearþ*, *wæs* and *uuiþ*, presents a type of ornament only randomly found among the first compiler’s annals, and therefore probably indicative of this feature’s presence in the source from which the information was derived, rather than his personal style. The form of any verse that might be the ultimate source here is obscured, but the insistence on *w*-alliteration is so striking that the suspicion of a poetic source seems justified.

Two further annals involving Hengest also include significant alliteration but no distinctive poetic vocabulary (A text) (Bately 1986, 17, 18):

<sup>5</sup> Compare the scribal obscuring of the poetic style in A’s version annal 838 (misdated 835 in all versions) in the BC text (Sparks 2011, 185; see further below).

<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere in the annals only found in 716 (A text): “Ecgbryht se arwierþa wer” (“Ecgeberht the very honourable man”).

449 7 on hiera dagum Hengest 7 Horsa from Wyr̥tgeorne geleapade Bretta kyninge gesohton Bretene on þam stape þe is genemned Ypwines fleot, ærest Brettum to fultume, ac hie eft on hie fuhton.

(and in their days Hengest and Horsa invited by Vortigern the king of the Britons, sought out Britain in the place that is called Ebbesfleet, first to support the Britons, but afterwards they fought against them.)

455 Her Hengest 7 Horsa fuhton wiþ Wyr̥tgeorne þam cyninge, in þære stowe þe is gecueden Agælesþrep, 7 his broþur Horsan man ofslog; & æfter þam Hengest feng to rice 7 Æsc his sunu.<sup>7</sup>

(In this year Hengest and Horsa fought against Vortigern the king in the place that is called Ægelsthrep, and his brother Horsa was killed and after that Hengest and his son Æsc took the kingdom.)

Other annals with similar alliterative patterning are (Bately 1986, 19–21):

495 Her cuomon twegen aldormen on Bretene, Cerdic 7 Cynric his sunu, mid V scipum in þone stede þe is gecueden Cerdicesora 7 þy ilcan dæge gefuhtun wiþ Walum.

(In this year two leaders came to Britain, Cerdic and Cynric his son, with five ships to the place that is called *Cerdicesora*, and the fought against the Britons on the same day.)

508 Her Cerdic 7 Cynric ofslogon æne brettisc cyning, þam was nama Natanleod, 7 V þusendu wera mid him. Æfter was þæt lond nemned Natanleaga oþ Cerdicesford.

(In this year Cerdic and Cynric killed a British king whose name was Natanleod, and 5,000 men with him. After that the land as far as Charford was named Netley.)

527 Her Cerdic 7 Cynric fuhton wiþ Brettas in þære stowe þe is gecueden Cerdicesleaga.

(In this year Cerdic and Cynric fought against the Britons at the place that is called Cerdicesleag.)

The alliterative patterning in these annals, even insistent as it is at times, does not constitute classical Old English verse, though it may point ultimately to earlier oral, or even poetic, transmission. One curious phenomenon exemplified in some of these annals is certainly evocative of the linguistic habits of Anglo-Saxon vernacular poets. Across these annals the Britons are called alternatively *Brettas* or *W(e)alas*, ethnonyms with an equivalent meaning. However, this distribution is not always random and in some cases we can see a variation in the choice of one or other ethnonym linked to a desire to alliterate words in close proximity. Annal 465 has *Walas* alliterating with *Wippedesfleote* and *wilisce*, while in annal 449 *Bretta* (perhaps unimaginatively) alliterates with *Bretene*, which can be compared with annal 571 “Cuþwulf feaht wiþ Bretwalas æt Bedcanforda” (“Cuthwulf fought against the Britons and Biedcanford”). That this pattern suggests a choice of terms based on the desire to create alliteration, rather than mere coincidence, would seem to be confirmed by a similar variation in the naming of places, where the alternation centres on a choice between *gecueden* and *nemned*. The verb form *gecueden* alliterates in annals 473 (“þe is gecueden Crecganford”), 495 (“þe is gecueden Cerdicesora”) and 527 (“þe is gecueden Cerdicesleaga”), but in annal 508 we find “was þæt lond nemned Natanleaga.”

<sup>7</sup> The significant separation of *stowe*, *ofslog* and *sunu* would not be expected in Old English verse.

We can also identify one further distinctive linguistic feature found in two annals for this period not found elsewhere among the first compiler's annals. In annal 584, where the suspicion of a poetic source was long ago raised by Sweet, the last clause of the annal is not connected to the rest of the sentence by the expected coordinating conjunction *ond* (Clark 1971, 221): "7 Ceaulin monige tunas genom 7 unarimedlice herereaf, ierre he hwearf þonan to his agnum." The grammatical sense is clear, and no editor has seen fit to supply the conjunction *ond* before *ierre*.<sup>8</sup> The presence of the kind of uncoordinated syntax that we might normally expect in poetry, found here in exactly the same place as poetic vocabulary, increases the likelihood of a poetic source somewhere behind this annal. One other example from this early block of annals of syntax common in verse, but otherwise absent from the common stock annals is found in annal 501 (Bately 1986, 20):

Her cuom Port on Bretene 7 his II suna Bieda 7 Mægla mid II scipum on þære stowe þe is gecueden Portesmufa 7 ofslogon *anne giongne brettisc monnan, swiþe æþelne monnan.* (italics added)

(In this year Port and his two sons Bieda and Mægla came to Britain with two ships to the place that is called Portsmouth and killed a young British man, [a] very noble man.)

The focus on the unnamed British man's youth and nobility is unique among a series of annals that nowhere else describes the character of any individual; that this individual is British is more striking still. Compounding the unusual character of this annal is the highly distinctive syntax of its final clause, where no conjunction connects it to the preceding information, and no article before the phrase *æþelne monnan*, which leans on the inflected indefinite article *anne* in the previous clause.<sup>9</sup> The syntax of this unusual elevated style looks very much like the descriptive apposition common in Old English verse (Robinson 1985, 3–5).

## A lost battle poem

A distinctive feature of all these early Chronicle entries is that they describe battles. This is not surprising in the context of annals interested in conquest, but nevertheless parallels other evidence for a lost Old English poem briefly describing and cataloguing historical battles found in the *Historia Anglorum* of Henry of Huntingdon (died c. 1157) (Greenway 1996, cii; Wilson 1952, 28–29; Rigg 1991, 64–65). Henry uses as a source a poem that briefly listed at least five battles that took place between 617 and 655, and a sixth in 825. It is possible that the poem included more, but Henry chose not to cite them in his *Historia Anglorum*. The nature of the evidence provided by the poem is complicated by the fact that the first five battles are in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and a number of these are also in the Chronicle (using Bede as the source), while the last, the Battle of Ellendun (825) is also described in the Chronicle:

- 1) Battle at the River Idle.

<sup>8</sup> The clause can be compared with *Beowulf* line 2268b "unbliðe hwearf."

<sup>9</sup> The inflected indefinite article is found elsewhere among the common stock annals only in 757 and 871, both by the second chronicler. There is no obvious reason to suspect his intervention in annal 501.

*Historia Anglorum* II.30 (Bede *Ecclesiastical History* II. 12, also cited by Henry; not in the Chronicle) (Greenway 1996, 114–15):

Vnde dicitur, “Amnis Idle Anglorum sanguine sorduit.”

(Of this it is said: “The river Idle was stained with English blood.”)<sup>10</sup>

2) Battle at the River Winwæd.

*Historia Anglorum* II.34 (Bede *Ecclesiastical History* III.24; Chronicle annal 655 (E654)) (Greenway 1996, 120–21):

Vnde dicitur:

“In Winwed amne uindicata est cedes Anne,

Cedes regum Sigbert et Egnice,

Cedes regum Oswald et Edwine.”

(Of this it is said: “At the Winwæd was avenged the slaughter of Anna, the slaughter of Kings Sigeberht and Ecgric, the slaughter of Kings Oswald and Edwin.”)

3) Battle of Hatfield.

*Historia Anglorum* III.33 (Bede *Ecclesiastical History* II.20, Chronicle annal 633) (Greenway 1996, 184–85):

Dicitur autem Hadfeld, “Rubens undique nobilium fumabat cruore.”

(It is said that Hatfield, “Turning red, steamed all over with the blood of noblemen.”)

4) Battle of Denisesburn.

*Historia Anglorum* III.34 (Bede *Ecclesiastical History* III.1-2; not in the Chronicle) (Greenway 1996, 188–89):

Vnde dicitur, “Cedes Cædwalla Denisi cursus cohercuit.”

(Of this it is said, “The slaughter of Cædwalla’s men blocked the course of the Denise.”)

5) Battle of Maserfeld.

*Historia Anglorum* III.39 (Bede *Ecclesiastical History* iii.9; Chronicle annal 641) (Greenway 1996, 194–95):

Vnde dicitur, “Campus Maserfeld sanctorum canduit ossibus.”

(Of this it is said, “The field of Maserfeld was whitened with the bones of saints.”)

6) Battle of Ellendun.

*Historia Anglorum* IV. 29 (Chronicle annal 825, misdated 823 in all versions) (Greenway 1996, 262–63):

Vnde dicitur: “Ællendune riuus cruore rubuit, ruina restitit, fetore tabuit.”

(Of this it is said: “Ællendune’s stream was reddened with blood, was stopped up with the fallen, was filled with stench.”)

It is not possible to determine the shape of the lost Old English poem, let alone when or how it was created. As far as it is possible to tell from Henry’s quotations from it, the poem seems to have been a catalogue poem similar to the Old English poem *Widsith*, though in the case of the lost poem apparently interested in battles only (Howe 1985, 178–79). The seventh-century battles included from it were between Mercia and Northumbria, while the battle at Ellendun in 825 (dated 827 in all versions) saw the West

<sup>10</sup> *Anglorum* might better mean “of the Angles” in context.

Saxon King Egberht and his son Æthelwulf defeat the Mercians under King Beornwulf, making “great slaughter” (“þær wæs micel wæl geslægen”; Bately 1986, 42).<sup>11</sup>

The fact that all six battles in the poem cited by Henry also appear in the written historical record gives rise to the possibility that the poem itself might have been a relatively late creation based on written sources. It is significant, nevertheless, that none of Henry’s phrasing is close to the descriptions of the battles in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* or the Chronicle. While it is possible that a putative Anglo-Saxon poet might have used these written sources and embellished their accounts with the kind of graphic detail provided by traditional Old English formulaic verse, it would be surprising if no echo of his source’s expression survived into Henry’s Latin renderings. Ultimately, we cannot know how the lost poem came to be. However, Henry’s use of it supplies the crucial fact that among the Old English poetic corpus there was at least one catalogue poem describing historical English battles, which beside a comparable record in *Widsith*, leads to the safe conclusion that there might well have been others, providing an important analogy and possibly a context for poetic terminology and style embedded within the early annals of the Chronicle that describe battles.

The elements which I have outlined suggest that oral traditions probably contributed some information (not necessarily reliable as history), to the annals of the fifth and sixth centuries. This is certainly the case in relation to genealogies, which share features with Old English verse (Bredehoft 2001, 14–38). It is unlikely that the first compiler of the common stock annals of the Chronicle is guilty of imaginatively creating material to fill what would otherwise be yawning gaps in the annals of the fifth and sixth centuries. It is perhaps also unlikely that this information came to him in a living poetic tradition. While this cannot be ruled out entirely, we might expect that if this were the case we would find less equivocal evidence of Old English poetic usage among these annals, rather than the tantalizing hints they contain. What is more likely is that early oral traditions concerning the migration period, perhaps in formal Old English verse, or alternatively oral traditions preserved in a type of formulaic utterance adjacent to poetry (perhaps incorporated into genealogies or regnal lists), found their way into written records in the course of the seventh century, after the introduction of the technology of writing into the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms with the arrival of the Christian religion. These written records may have been in the form of Easter Table annals, which Joanna Story (2005) has shown were probably being kept in Kent and elsewhere from the seventh century. Kenneth Harrison has argued persuasively for the use of Easter Table records among the Chronicle’s early annals as indicated by the repetition of near-identical information found nineteen years apart in fifth- and early sixth-century annals (for example, 495/514 and 508/527), aligned with the nineteen-year lunar cycle embedded in the formatting of Easter Tables (Harrison 1976, 134).<sup>12</sup> It is not difficult to imagine a scenario where oral traditions concerning the Anglo-Saxon conquest of Britain were retrospectively entered into Easter Tables in computistical manuscripts in the course of the seventh century, in many cases preserving the linguistic features marking their previous oral mode of transmission and cultural memorialization. In this way the traces of verse-related linguistic features first

<sup>11</sup> HA IV.29; described with more detail in Æthelweard’s *Chronicon* (Campbell 1962, 29).

<sup>12</sup> Harrison (1971) also suggests annals for these early decades embed the earlier non-literate transmission of remembered events; Foot (2012, 358) concurs with this suggestion.



identified by Sweet lend weight to Frank Stenton's suggestion of a "proto-chronicle" somewhere behind the early annals (Stenton 1925; Wheeler 1921).

### Later annals

Annals outside those of the earliest period occasionally also contain significant alliteration that could suggest either a direct or an indirect debt to poetry on the part of the common stock's makers. Two of these concern the reign of Ine (Bately 1986, 34; underlining added):

722 Her Æþelburg cuen towearp Tantun 7 Ine ær timbrede; 7 Aldbryht wræccea gewat on Suþrige 7 on Suþseaxe, 7 Ine gefeaht wiþ Suþseaxum.

(In this year Queen Æthelburh demolished Taunton, which Ine had earlier built; and Ealdberht the exile departed into Surrey and Sussex, and Ine fought against the South Saxons.)

725 Her Wihtræd Cantwara cyning forþferde, þæs cyn is beforan. 7 Eadberht feng to Centric. 7 Ine feaht wiþ Suþseaxan 7 þær ofslóg Aldbryht.

(In this year Wihtræd king of Kent died, and his ancestry is given above. And Eadberht succeeded in the kingdom of Kent. And Ine fought against the South Saxons and killed Ealdberht there.)

There are no intervening annals, so that the story of Ine's pursuit of the exile Ealdberht develops across annals 722 and 725. The alliterating terms at times approximate Old English verse lines, again suggestive of a poetic source behind the first compiler's phrasing. The use of the poetic term *wræccea* (*wræcca*), meaning "exile" or "fugitive," gives further weight to this possibility (Grein 1912, 824).

Two further eighth-century annals with significant alliteration concern the reign of Cuthred of Wessex (ruled 740–56). The Chronicle's record about Cuthred is relatively detailed, with six annals about this king, compared with two that name his predecessor Æthelheard (his accession in annal 726 and death in annal 740). Annal 740 (A741), on the accession of Cuthred, employs such marked alliteration that it could be formatted as Old English verse (Bately 1986, 35):

Her Æþelheard cyning forþferde, 7 feng Cuþræd to Wesseaxna rice  
7 heold XVI wintra 7 hearðlice gewon wiþ Æþelbald cyning

(In this year Æthelheard died and Cuthred succeeded to the kingdom of the West Saxons, and he held it for sixteen years and stoutly fought against king Æthelbald.)

The verb *winnan* ("to fight, to battle, to contend with") is not unusual in the annals, and has strong poetic associations (Grein 1912, 803). The collocation here of *winnan* with the adjective *heardlice* is particularly noteworthy, and not only because the use of descriptive terms is so rare among the common stock annals authored by the first compiler. This adjective is found in c. 50 places in the Old English corpus, with seven of these uses poetic (Grein 1912, 319; *DOE*, s.v. *heardlice*).

The poetic character of the first annal of Cuthred's reign is matched in annal 750, where again there is alliteration coupled with an adjective with poetic associations (Bately 1986, 36; underlining added): "Her Cuþred cyning gefeaht uuip Æþelhun þone

ofermedan aldormonn” (“In this year King Cuthred fought against Æthelhun the presumptuous ealdorman”). Some elements of the alliteration as it is shaped here, as in many earlier annals, emerge as more stylistic than poetic, though the presence of the adjective *ofermeda* in an alliterating context is more likely indicative of a poetic source than poetic style on the part of an annalistic author who generally refrains from such flourishes (Grein 1912, 519).<sup>13</sup>

The generally phrased statement that “Cuthred heardlice gewon wiþ Æþelbald cyning” should not be read as a report of the events of the year 740 only—the conflict between Wessex and Mercia was an ongoing one (as annal 752 reports). This formulaic summary of the great ongoing struggle of Cuthred’s reign is strikingly paralleled by a similar statement (including alliteration) embedded in annal 757 (Bately 1986, 35, 36):

740 7 heold XVI wintra 7 heardlice gewon wiþ Æþelbald cyning  
 757 7 se Cynewulf oft miclum gefeohtum feaht uuiþ Bretwalam; 7 ymb .XXXI. wintra . . .  
 (and Cynewulf often fought in great battles against the British; and about thirty-one years  
 . . .)

It is difficult to compare elements of these annals too closely because of the later major intervention in annal 757 by the interpolating chronicler who revised the first compiler’s presumably much briefer account of the events of this year; the incorrect regnal length of thirty-one years for Cynewulf is evidence of this intervention. However, the shared alliteration and formulaic summary of both reigns may imply not only that these elements both reflect the authorship of the first compiler, but that he employed a similar (or identical) source for both Cuthred’s and Cynewulf’s reigns, and that this source had a poetic character which introduced these (and perhaps other) kings’ reigns with a statement of their regnal length and a very brief summary of a significant feature of their reigns.

### 757 and related annals

Structural elements of the story of “Cynewulf and Cyneheard” in annal 757 (ABCDE755) (Bately 1986, 36–38) have suggested to some scholars that oral transmission could be the ultimate source of its extended narrative.<sup>14</sup> As Janet Bately demonstrated more than three decades ago through vocabulary and other linguistic evidence, much of the content of this annal is an interpolation made by the same chronicler author (my second chronicler) who wrote the annals from c. 867 to c. 880, including the important long annals 871 and 878, describing pivotal years in the life King Alfred the Great. This same author’s linguistic fingerprints are also present in the long annal 855(–58) and annal 838 (misdated 835 in all versions); it is likely that he also interpolated material into other pre-existing annals that lie beyond the limits of Bately’s linguistic tests.

<sup>13</sup> The morphology suggests this might be a form of the adjective *ofermæte*, normally meaning “excessive, immoderate,” which is unlikely here; *ofermeda* appears to be an adjectival form of the feminine noun *ofermetto* (“pride”) (Clark Hall 1960, s. v. *ofermetto*).

<sup>14</sup> Most extensively explored by McTurk (1981); not all critics share this view (see Bredehoft 2001, 39–41; Scragg 1997, 182).

On the whole, the evidence suggests that the second chronicler's employment of poetic elements in annal 757 (and in other contributions) reflects his stylistic preferences rather than poetic sources. One of the various striking features of the carefully crafted annal 757 is the presence in it of distinctive Old English poetic vocabulary. The use of the poetic noun *bana* ("slayer, killer") is familiar to all students of Old English, and found in the reported speech of the dead King Cynewulf's lately arrived followers in an expression of loyalty to their dead leader: "7 hie næfre his banan folgian noldon" ("and they would never follow his slayer"). The *Dictionary of Old English* counts c. 50 instances of *bana* in the Old English corpus, with a disproportionate number in poetry (Grein 1912, 34; *DOE*, s.v. *bana*).

A number of other poetic terms can be listed, usually occurring in contexts expressing heroic sentiment and explaining motive, as in the instance of *bana*. The explanation of motivation is a rare stylistic feature across the common stock annals, but frequently found in the annals attributable to this author. When the swineherd kills the deposed and exiled Sigebert in the wood of *Andred*, we are told "7 he *wræc* þone aldormon Cumbran" ("and he avenged the ealdorman Cumbra"). The verb *wrecan* is frequent in poetry with a variety of meanings, but best attested in verse with the sense of "avenge," as found here (Grein 1912, 825–26). When Cynewulf is being attacked in the bower at *Meretun*, the troop that accompanies him is alerted by the cries of his female companion: "7 þa on þæs wifes gebærum onfundon þæs cyninges þegnas þa unstillnesse" ("and then from the woman's cries the king's thegns realized the trouble"). The primary meaning of the noun *gebæru* is "behaviour, demeanour, attitude," and its c. 55 occurrences are among poetry and prose (Grein 1912, 34). In this general sense *gebæru* is found in *Andreas* (line 1569), *Elene* (line 709), *Wife's Lament* (line 21). However, in the much rarer sense of "cry, outcry," *gebæru* is found only in annal 757 and the poem *Phoenix* (line 125; *DOE*, s.v. *gebæru*).

When the dead king's followers outside the gates at *Meretun* offer safe passage to their friends among Cyneheard's supporters inside the gates, these defenders heroically dismiss the offer in a slip by the author into direct speech: "Þa cuædon hie þæt hie hie þæs ne *onmunden* þon ma þe eowre geferan þe mid þam cyninge ofslægene wærun" ("Then they said that they would not consider that any more than did your companions who were slain with the king"). The verb *onmunan* ("to esteem, think worthy of, care for") is very rare. A search of the *Dictionary of Old English* corpus search finds only c. 7 instances outside this use in the Chronicle, with three of these in poetry (*Andreas*, line 895; *Beowulf*, line 2640; and *Instructions for Christians*, line 154; Clark Hall 1960, s.v. *onmunan*; Healey et al. 2009).<sup>15</sup> The compound *rihtfæderancynn*, the unusual term employed to describe the fact that Cynewulf and Cyneheard shared "correct paternal ancestry" is found in the annals here in annal 784, where it appears with the same phrasing ("hyra (his) ryhtfæderencyn gæþ to Cerdice"; "their (his) correct paternal ancestry goes to Cerdic"). Compounds with *fæder-* are common in poetry, and include *fæderencynn*, which occurs only three times in the corpus, two of these in poetry (*Exodus*, line 560, *Christ A*, line 248).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> In the same sentence is *gefera*, included by Grein (1912, 192), found most often in prose, with c. 450 occurrences.

<sup>16</sup> Compare *fæderæþelu*, *fædereþel*, *fæderenbroþor*, *fæderenmæg*, *fædergeard*. Outside the Chronicle, the term *ryhtfæderencyn* is found only in the will of ealdorman Alfred (871x889),

Another term that shares in the poetic register is the adverb *unheanlice*, which is used to describe Cynewulf's defence when ambushed by Cyneheard and his men: "7 þa unheanlice hine werede" ("and he defended himself not ignominiously").<sup>17</sup> The negative form *unheanlice* is extremely rare, found only here in the Chronicle and once elsewhere in the Old English translation of Gregory the Great's *Dialogi* (Hecht 1965, 43). The adverb *heanlic* appears in the corpus only five times, with two of these occurrences in the poem *Christ A* (lines 31, 372); the adjective *heanlic* has eight occurrences, two of which are in poetry (*Battle of Maldon*, line 55; *Judgement Day II*, line 258). The poetic flavour of *unheanlice* is strengthened by both its heroic context in the annal, and also its association with a prominent structural element in the narrative. The two main battles described in annal 757 take place in the liminal space first of the doorway of the bower and later the gates on the *tun*; other poetic terms are also associated with action and dialogue around these spaces. The author emphasizes Cynewulf's heroic defensive stance in the doorway: "7 he on þa duru eode" ("and he went into the doorway"). While this is a natural defensive position, both this emphasis and the association of heightened poetic language around these doors and the later exchange at the gates invites comparison with a scene in the fragment *The Battle of Finnsburh* (lines 13–23, 41–42; Klaeber 1950, 245–47):

Da aras mænig goldhladen ðegn, gyrde hine his swurde;  
 ða to dura eodon drihtlice ceman,  
 Sigiferð and Eaha, hyra sword getugon,  
 and æt oþrum durum Ordlaf and Guþlaf,  
 and Hengest sylf hwearf him on laste.  
 Ða gyt Garulfe Guðere styrde,  
 ðæt he swa freolic feorh forman siþe  
 to ðære healle durum hyrsta ne bære,  
 nu hyt niþa heard anyman wolde;  
 ac he frægn ofer eal undearninga,  
 deormod hæleþ, hwa ða duru heolde.  
 . . .  
 Hig fuhton fif dagas, swa hyra nan ne feol  
 drihtgesiða, ac hig ða duru heoldon.

(Then arose many a gold-clad thegn, girded his sword; then Sigiferth and Eaha, noble warriors, went to the doorway, drew their swords, and at the other doorway Ordlaf and Guthlaf, and Hengest himself followed in their footsteps. Then still, Garulf urged Guthhere that he, so noble a spirit, should not wear his armour to the hall's door at the outset, now that one hard in his hatred intended to deprive him of it; but he, brave hero, asked openly above it all, who held the doorway . . . They fought five days, so that not one of that company of warriors fell, but they held the doors.)

The doorways in both texts provide natural locations for defence, but in both the poetic fragment and annal 757 the place is elevated into a locus for the demonstration of heroic virtue and courage, as well as the loyalty of companions in the fight. In this context it is

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beside the hapax legomenon *rehtmeodrencynn*, closely contemporary with the second chronicler's use (Harmer 1914, 13–15).

<sup>17</sup> Grein (1912, 317) regards both the adverbial form *heanlice* and the adjectival *heanlic* as poetic.

curious that annal 757 develops alliteration only up to the moment of Cynewulf's heroic defence. Some of this alliteration is on unstressed syllables, sometimes not: *Westseaxna wiotan*; *Andred adræfde*; *gefeohum feaht*; *hine þær berad and þone bur utan beeode*; *feoh and feorh*. This stylistic feature diminishes quickly as the annal progresses. Also notable is the employment of the formulation *lytle werode* in the context of alliteration: "7 þa geascode he þone cyning lytle werode on wifcyþþe" ("and he discovered the king with a little company in the company of a woman"). The formulation *lytle werode* is used in the Chronicle only by this author, here and in annals 871 and 878 (2x) (Konshuh 2015). Outside the Chronicle *lytle werode* is found only as a b-line verse in *Genesis A* (line 2093) and in the Old English *Orosius* (Bately 1980, 130). We can compare this with the formula *mæte werode* in *Dream of the Rood* (lines 69, 124), with the implication that *lytle werode* is a formulation with a debt to the poetic tradition. The noun *we(o)rod*, though found in prose, has a heavy preponderance in poetry (Grein 1912, 780–81).

One of the linguistic tests developed by Janet Bately in determining the distinctive authorship of the Cynewulf and Cyneheard interpolation, annal 855, and the annals of centred on the 870s was the use by this new author of a verb construction involving a form of the verb *wesan* (to be) + present participle. This construction describing a continuous action in the past is also found in annal 838 (misdated 835 in all versions) (Bately 1986, 42–43):

Her guom micel sciphere on Westwalas, 7 hie to anum gegierdon 7 wiþ Ecgbryht Westseaxna cyning *winnende wæron*. Þa he þæt hierde 7 mid fierde ferde 7 him wiþ feaht æt Hengestdune 7 þær gefliemde ge þa Walas ge þa Deniscan.

(In this year a great fleet arrived among the West Welsh [Cornwall], and they later combined as one and were fighting against King Ecgberht of the West Saxons. Then he heard that and went with an army and fought against them at *Hengestdun* [Hingston Down] and there put to flight both the West Welsh and the Danes.)

The heightened prose, which also features rhyme (*hierde, fierde*), was noted by Plummer, who also observed the diminution of the poetic style of this annal across time: "A seems almost to break into verse . . . C keeps this feature almost intact. In B it is obscured, and in D, E, F is wholly lost" (Plummer 1952, 2:75; Sparks 2011, 188). The presence of a linguistic indication that this annal probably has been modified in some way (or even authored) by the second chronicler makes it difficult to determine the extent to which a poetic source might have been involved.<sup>18</sup> However, alliteration is also a feature of annal 836 (misdated 833 in all versions; Bately 1986, 42):

Her gefeaht Ecgbryht cyning wiþ XXXV sciphlæsta æt Carrum, 7 þær wearþ micel wæl geslægen, 7 þa Denescan ahton wælstowe gewald

<sup>18</sup> The second chronicler may also be responsible for interventions in other annals with poetic symptoms: 825, which includes the formula *micle werode* (apparently modelled on *lytle werode*), and the detail that "seo þeod gesohte Ecgbryht cyning him to friþe 7 to mundboran for Miercna ege" ("the nation [of Kent] sought the peace of King Ecgberht and his protection because of the terror of the Mercians"), employing the poetic terms *friþ* and *mundbora* closely associated with alliteration (Grein 1912, 224, 484); 658, which includes the verb *anforlættan* ("forþon he his swostor anforlet," "because he threw over his [Penda's] sister"), which occurs c. 50x in the corpus, but with disproportionate frequency in poetry (*DOE*, s.v. *anforlættan*).

(In this year King Ecgberht fought against thirty-five ship's crews at *Carrum* [Carhampton], and there was much slaughter there, and the Danes had control of the field of battle.)

The later part of annal 836 uses the verb *forþferan* (2x) to describe the act of dying, a key linguistic marker associated with annals written by the first compiler, against the second chronicler's preference for *gefaran* ("to die"). This presence of alliteration here, then, would appear to be more indicative of a source that included this feature, and that perhaps the second chronicler has amplified this element in reworking of material in annal 838. The formulaic (and alliterating) expression *agan wælstowe gewald* first appears in the common stock in 836, the first of seven uses that continues until annal 871, therefore spanning the contributions of the first compiler and the second chronicler (annals 836, 840, 843, 860, 871 (3x)). Both the term *wælstowe* and its alliterative association with a form of the verb *wealdan* create a strong poetic connection. The compound *wæl-stowe* ("slaughter-place") is evocative of the tradition of poetic kennings (Grein 1912, 754).<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

On the balance of probability, it would seem that Sweet was right in his suspicion that the annals of first compiler of the Chronicle owe a debt to poetry for some of the information they contain. This is strongly suggested not only by the presence of alliterative patterning in some of the annals, but also the close association of alliteration with poetic vocabulary, and very rare traces of poetic syntax which are not normal features of the compiler's prose style. In relation to the earliest annals it is impossible to determine whether the information contained in these distinctive annals came to the first compiler directly from poetic sources, or mediated through earlier annalistic records such as Easter Tables. The shape of these putative poetic sources is of course very difficult to determine, but we should not necessarily expect that they conformed to the conventions and standards of the kind of classical Old English verse with which we are familiar. The shape of the eighth-century annals of Ine and Cuthred, echoing the earlier annals, implies that the type of verse from which they might descend was not very detailed in its descriptions, and perhaps was associated with genealogical information, which itself was often remembered and transmitted with a close dependence on the alliteration of names (Bredehoft 2001, 16–23). The possibility that the first compiler directly used poetic sources for eighth-century kings is greater than for those of the century-and-a-half from 449. Nevertheless, it would be unsurprising if poetic traditions once existed concerning the *adventus Saxonum*, and especially Hengest's role in it. It is striking that five of the annals (449, 455, 473, 457, 465) that hint at poetic sources through the presence of alliteration and other features describe the exploits of Hengest, one of the legendary first leaders of the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain. The name Hengest appears elsewhere in the Old English poetry, set in the same historical moment described by the Chronicle's early annals. Whether or not the poetic character named in

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<sup>19</sup> Compare: *Genesis A*, line 2005, "weold wælstowe"; *Beowulf*, line 2051, "weoldon wælstowe"; 2984, "hie wælstowe wealdan moston"; *Battle of Maldon*, line 95, "wælstowe wealdan mote"; and also "wælstowe gewæld ahton" in the *Old English Orosius* (Bately 1980, 64).

the Finnsburh episode in *Beowulf* (1071–159) and *The Fight at Finnsburh* can be definitively equated with the leader of the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Kent is beside the point: it is likely that the two were the same person in the later Anglo-Saxon imagination (Fulk, Bjork, and Niles 2008, 182–3; Orchard 2003, 173–86). Apart from Hengest, all the passages suggestive of poetic sources concern West Saxon kings, with the implication that their deeds were memorialized in some kind of verse from the very earliest period, and that this type of commemoration continued as least as far as the reign of Cuthred in the eighth century, and perhaps up to the reign of Ecgberht in the ninth. An implication of this line of reasoning is the Chronicle's annals for the two centuries after 449 transmit some of the earliest texts composed in Old English.

The presence of poetic elements in annals from the mid-eighth century into the ninth often imply a direct contact with poetic sources. In the first few sentences of annal 757 the presence of poetic elements may reflect material authored by the first compiler that the second chronicler has overwritten. As we have seen, this early part of annal 757 shares features with the highly poetic annal 740, and the alliteration of the opening of annal 757 may reflect aspects of both the first compiler's authorship and an underlying poetic source used by him. When we can be more certain that the second compiler is at work, that is describing the two battles at *Meretun* that took place in 786, but which he places in annal 757, alliteration does not feature. Annal 838 shows that this author could develop alliteration, but this for him seems to have been an ornamental aspect of his style. The same is probably true of his use of poetic vocabulary, which elevates heroic moments in the Cynewulf and Cyneheard story toward a poetic register. This usage demonstrates that this annalist was familiar with Old English verse and its specialized vocabulary, but the pattern of the usage in annal 757 suggests that no poetic source inspired its writing.

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