

Anlezark, Daniel. 2025. *Constructing the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles*. Anglo-Saxon Studies 52. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer. Pp. x + 297. ISBN 9781843847489.

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The study of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles is thriving, and Daniel Anlezark's new book tackles the challenge of bringing all the conclusions and debates together, deepening our understanding in particular of early Chronicle genesis. As Anlezark tells us in the Acknowledgements (viii) to this volume, he initially intended to write a companion volume but this grew beyond that scope. The first two chapters and chapter 6 especially are very companion-like, providing clear overviews of what the Chronicles are, how they developed, and the stories they tell. The scope includes all seven major manuscripts and the chronicles compiled over the next centuries which made use of lost versions of the annals, and covers the full arc from Common Stock to post-Conquest. Throughout, Anlezark builds on the philological and palaeographical studies conducted especially by the editors of the collaborative editions, Janet Bately, and Pauline Stafford, and his analyses are firmly embedded in historical scholarship. By bringing together all this research, Anlezark provides a clear and easy-to-read overview of research on Chronicle manuscripts, blocks of annals, possible authors, and compilation contexts for the whole period. His detailed critical analysis of the ninth-century annals convincingly identifies the two original compilers and their goals in crafting a history.

Chapter 1 is a clear and readable overview of the surviving Chronicle manuscripts, as well as of as many lost Chronicle manuscripts as can be determined by the medieval chroniclers who used a version that has not survived. The palaeography, codicology, compilation context, where possible, of each surviving Chronicle manuscript (including the neglected G and H) are covered in 1–2 pages, except for A which requires over 6 pages. This is the most up-to-date discussion of each manuscript and what scholars agree upon for each. This is a thorough synthesis and a very useful reference tool. The next three chapters all deal with the Common Stock, the set of annals to c. 892. Chapter 2 introduces all the complexities of the common stock that are exciting for Chronicle enthusiasts, and makes them accessible for students or anyone trying to get an overview of why the common stock can be so difficult. This chapter is effectively an introduction to the next two, and sets up his argument for the common stock as

a manuscript prepared by one individual and revised by another, rather than a collaboration by two (or more) authors. This chapter is full of footnotes which point forward to later chapters, which can be a bit frustrating at the time, but means the text remains accessible throughout, and is likewise an excellent introduction to the common stock.

The most valuable part of this book for our understanding of the Chronicle's inception is chapters 3 and 4, where Anlezark digs into the problem of the two different voices in the common stock (the annals to c. 892) which have been obvious since Janet Bately's 1978 article. These chapters, "Making Time" and "Writing King Alfred" could just as easily be called "First Compiler" and "Second Chronicler," as each chapter focuses on identifying the work done by one of these two scholars. Anlezark's first compiler, the person responsible for the bulk of the annals to c. 867 and for collecting sources and organizing them into an *Anno Domini* dating system is the topic of chapter 3. Beginning with the chronological dislocation, Anlezark's careful analysis of first compiler's sources means that he can trace the compiler's goals and methodology in creating the first chronicle version. Anlezark uses the annals' language and content to determine that a lost set of annals or marginal annotations on Easter tables from Canterbury, dating to Archbishop Wulfred's tenure (d. 832), were painstakingly brought into line with Bede's epitome and its continuations. The one-year chronological dislocation at 832 to c. 851 was brought into the annals because of confusion reading this Canterbury source, Anlezark argues; the additional two-year dislocation (of 754 to 756) came at a later stage, and compounded the 832 –c. 851 dislocation to three years. Anlezark's respect and admiration for this compiler rings clear throughout the chapter, as he builds an argument for a meticulous researcher with "a desire to record history in the *longue durée*" (112).

Anlezark's analysis of second chronicler, the individual responsible for the annals c. 867 to 878, many interventions in First Compiler's annals, and the culprit behind the chronological dislocation from 754, is the topic of chapter 4 and is equally convincing. It is also a fair portrait of a serious scholar, even though this is the individual who, Anlezark argued, botched the dating from 754 until they noticed the problem around 860. At times we can see Anlezark's frustration with second chronicler, who, "not nearly as skilled at ordering chronology as his predecessor, appears to have confused himself and made some unfortunate decisions" (117). Anlezark conducts a measured analysis of this hapless chronicler's "ideological imprint" (133) in his annals, and identifies many of second chronicler's interventions in the previous annals, based not only on vocabulary, but also clues like Christian symbolism, events stretching beyond one year, emotional register, and an interest in legitimate succession. This chronicler may not have been as familiar with the early sources, but was focused on "careful

selection” as their art of narrative, connecting the centuries with “structural links that serve ideological and thematic points” (135).

After these two complex chapters, Anlezark returns somewhat to companion style, and chapter 5 “Parting Company” looks at the annals for the century after 892. This chapter covers the various blocks of annals from 893 through the tenth century, and includes the compilation of the Northern Recension. Here, Anlezark says, we can begin to “refer to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles in the plural,” and he draws upon the creation of MS C and its predecessor, as well as other lost chronicles, to prove that though the annals are not as extensive, there was a great deal of Chronicle-copying going on in this period. Chapter 6 explores how the chronicles came back together in the reign of Cnut and then drew apart again thereafter. The first third of the chapter covers the Æthelredian annals, arguing it is precisely in Cnut’s reign that a unified Chronicle took up the call of the *Angelcynn/Englalande*, recalling the identity politics so important in the common stock. Anlezark moves onto the “fallow years” before the chronicles C D and E again diverged into partisan accounts in the reign of Edward the Confessor, and concludes with the post-Conquest annals. Throughout, Anlezark refers to missing exemplars and provides close readings of the texts, and shows how annals were created differently in response to contemporary political pressures. Finally, chapter 7 covers the poetry in the Chronicles, beginning with the *Battle of Brunanburh*. Anlezark again synthesizes all the debates about each of these poems, before turning to the rhythmical prose which can be found starting in annal D and E 959 (from the Northern Recension), and links this development to Archbishop Wulfstan. Throughout, Anlezark’s coverage is comprehensive and there are many conclusions which invite closer examination.

The most significant argument this book makes is that the first two chroniclers were not working together concurrently. Anlezark argues convincingly that second chronicler intervened in first compiler’s annals at a stage when first compiler was no longer around to protect their dating system from second chronicler’s revisions, which means that we are looking at a two-part compilation of the original common stock. He also implies there was an interval of years between the two stages with the first stage beginning as early as the 860s (120). The second chronicler, Anlezark says, was clearly working during the reign of Alfred because their ideological message is more pro-Alfredian than first compiler’s. I agree with Anlezark’s arguments about the division of labour between the two, but I am not convinced that first compiler could have been working substantially before second chronicler. The 860s or even 870s would have been a difficult time for a large-scale history project in Wessex. The two authors do have different ideological positions, but first compiler’s annals also promote the primacy of Wessex among the post-Roman kingdoms and suggest a translation of imperial and Christian authority from Jerusalem and Rome to

Wessex, values which can be seen across the Alfredian literary productions. I think we may be looking at different understandings of Alfred's goals, with first compiler promoting the kingdom of Wessex as a leader of Britannia, while second chronicler was more narrowly focused on Alfred's reign, his family, and promoting the succession. It is possible that these two authors worked on their projects concurrently, but second chronicler outlived first compiler, and then added their own content (and errors) to first compiler's work when editing the two projects together. It is even possible that first compiler joined the project when second chronicler had already drafted the 870s annals, and sought to expand a narrow history dealing with only a decade or so to the wider ambitions of Alfred's court from the late 880s, and second chronicler retained editorial control due to chance or planning. However, this sort of argument is only possible because of Anlezark's careful work differentiating these first two chroniclers.

There are plenty of productive points dropped in throughout the book which Anlezark does not have time to pursue in-depth. Anlezark suggests, for example, that Asser's last use of 887 (written 889 or later) may suggest a "transitional moment in the creation of the common stock annals" (52). Is this the point he thinks manuscript A was conceived of and the editing began in earnest? When discussing the post-common stock Alfredian annals, he suggests that because the MS C version of the Mercian Register begins with a blank annal for 896, that its exemplar had a version of the annals 892–96 that only went to 895 (166). Scholarship is fairly united that this block of annals was constructed as a unit, so this is a very interesting suggestion to not delve into. Should we reassess that claim in support of a series of annals that may have been disseminated in more than one phase? He tends to date the Northern Recension to rather later than Stafford (2020) did in her recent volume because of its consistent removal of Alfredian ideological matter (176–80). He argues indirectly for a compilation in Cnut's reign, since these annals "reflect a moment when a new political order had eclipsed West Saxon royal power [i.e., after 1016], rendering its genealogical ideology legitimating authority by descent either redundant or subversive" (180). Anlezark leaves these suggestions like a trail of breadcrumbs throughout for the reader to pick up on.

This book is an essential reference for anyone working on the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles; there is something for everyone in here. It goes beyond the remit of a Companion, telling the story of the Chronicles while continuously engaging in close readings and analysis of the annals' development over time; it is precisely this depth that makes his analytical arguments so compelling. It provides a satisfying solution to the problem of the two different compilers' voices and the chronological dislocation in Chapters 3 and 4, and while this section may prove challenging for undergraduates, it remains accessible. I plan to assign it in my next seminar. This is a notoriously difficult body of texts because they are an

accretion of manuscripts compiled over centuries with different purposes, and there are still many open questions. Anlezark's book covers the annals from the common stock to post-Conquest, providing an entry-point for anyone looking to join the debates.

References

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