



King Alfred and the Sibyl: sources of praise in the Latin acrostic verses of Bern, Burgerbibliothek, 67I

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This article offers an analysis of the possible sources that influenced the composition of the sole surviving set of Latin verses that were composed for the Anglo-Saxon king Alfred the Great. In particular, a hitherto unrecognized textual model is identified, namely the 'Sibylline acrostic'. Consideration of their potential sources also provides a greater appreciation of the social and cultural values of these Latin verses and of what, in turn, they tell us about the Alfredian milieu in which they were produced, presented and consumed.

In the late ninth century a set of Latin acrostic verses were composed in praise of Alfred the Great (r. 871–99). They comprise just thirteen hexameters and are preserved in a single manuscript in a rather corrupt state. Yet they are significant: they are an example of Latin composition from a time and place that was dominated by vernacular literary activity; they are in fact the only surviving Latin verses understood to have been composed in late ninth-century England.¹ Moreover, no earlier acrostics exist that honour an Anglo-Saxon king. These verses are well known, in no small part thanks to the work of Michael Lapidge, who has argued that they were the work of John the Old

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¹ Note that other surviving Latin poems could potentially have been composed in late ninth-century England but such a specific date cannot be proven; see, for example, the acrostic verses concerning Saint Guthlac in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 307, fols 52r–52v.

Saxon, a scholar and member of King Alfred's court and the sometime abbot of Athelney. Lapidge's argument has proved extremely influential, although it has recently been challenged.² Aside from the question of authorship, however, scholars have rarely explored these verses in depth, perhaps due to their pithy and corrupt nature. Nevertheless, they are an important witness to literary activity within one of the most remarkable intellectual and political milieux of the Anglo-Saxon period. The purpose of this article is to draw attention to some of the potential sources that influenced their composition. Primarily, it will examine an earlier set of acrostics, the 'Sibylline acrostic', which is likely to have served as the model for the conceptualization and composition of the first seven lines of these Alfredian hexameters. Such source criticism provides an opportunity to consider the processes from which these verses emerged. It also offers hints at the education and intellectual engagement of the poet, his or her authorial intentions, and the possible audience responses that these verses elicited in a late ninth-century West Saxon context. Opening a window onto Latin performance and cultural aspirations, these verses and their sources enrich our understanding of the court of King Alfred.

The text

To begin, I provide the text of the acrostics as well as a translation. The manuscript in which these verses are preserved, Bern, Burgerbibliothek, 67I, is a ninth-century gospelbook of Cornish or Welsh origin.³ The acrostics were added immediately below the closing passage of the Gospels in a Welsh or Cornish hand of the late ninth or early tenth century, as one can see in Fig. 1.⁴ Later in the tenth century, several documents pertaining to the royal estate of Bedwyn, Wiltshire were also added to this codex, offering an additional body of evidence for

² M. Lapidge, 'Some Latin Poems as Evidence for the Reign of Athelstan', *ASE* 9 (1981), pp. 61–98, repr. in and cited from his *Anglo-Latin Literature 900–1066* (London, 1993), pp. 49–86. For a recent challenge, see R. Gallagher, 'Latin Acrostic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon England: Reassessing the Contribution of John the Old Saxon', *Medium Ævum* 86 (2017), pp. 249–74; see also G.R. Wieland, 'A New Look at the Poem "Archalis clamare triumuir"', in G.R. Wieland, C. Ruff and R.G. Arthur (eds), *Insignis Sophiae Arcator: Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Michael Herren on his 65th Birthday*, Publications of the Journal of Medieval Latin 6 (Turnhout, 2006), pp. 178–92, although this latter publication is focused on John the Old Saxon's authorship of another set of acrostic verses, in honour of King Æthelstan.

³ For Bern, Burgerbibliothek, 67I, see H. Gneuss and M. Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A Bibliographical Handlist of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100*, Toronto Anglo-Saxon Series 15 (Toronto, 2014), no. 794, p. 567.

⁴ W.M. Lindsay, *Early Welsh Script* (Oxford, 1912), pp. 10–16; D.N. Dumville, *Wessex and England from Alfred to Edgar: Six Essays on Political, Cultural, and Ecclesiastical Revival*, Studies in Anglo-Saxon History 3 (Woodbridge, 1992), p. 79, n. 110.

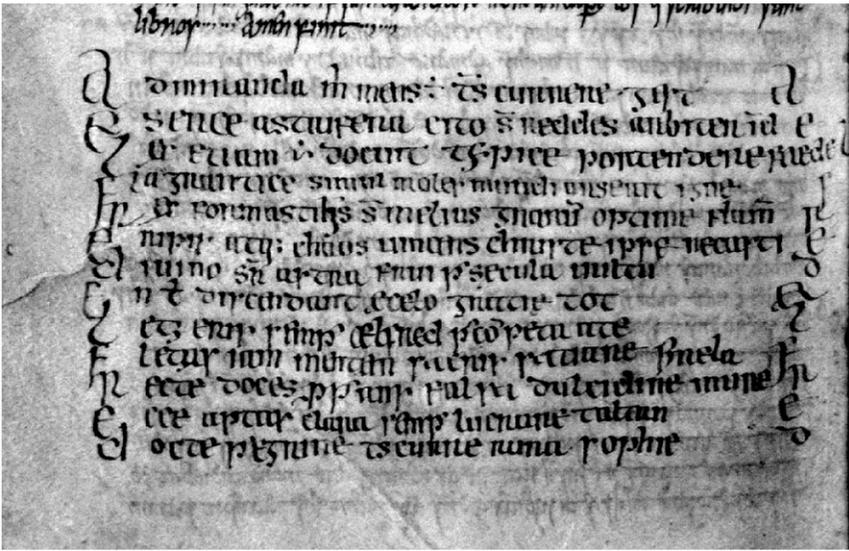


Fig. 1 The acrostic verses in Bern, Burgerbibliothek, 671, fol. 74v. By permission of the Burgerbibliothek of Bern

associating it with the West Saxon royal household. It has even been suggested that at some stage this book may have been in the personal possession of King Alfred.⁵ When one considers the corruptions within these verses as they are preserved, however, it seems unlikely that their addition to this manuscript represents the original context in which they were first presented and performed.

Hitherto the verses have been edited four times by other scholars, with Lapidge's edition being the most recent.⁶ The following version, which is my own, departs from that of Lapidge in several places, for reasons of grammar, sense and prosody. Most of the readings that differ from those of Lapidge can variously be found in earlier editions.⁷ It should be stressed that my alternative readings do not substantially alter the meaning of the verses:

Admiranda mihi mens est transcurrere gest A	I
Ex ^a arce ^b astrifera cito sed redis ^c arbiter ind E	2

⁵ D. Pratt, 'Kings and Books in Anglo-Saxon England', *ASE* 43 (2014), pp. 297–377, at p. 318.

⁶ *Carmina mediæ aevi maximam partem inedita*, ed. H. Hagen (Bern, 1877), p. 11; *Poetae Latini aevi Carolini*, ed. K. Strecker (Berlin, 1923), p. 1078; Lindsay, *Early Welsh Script*, pp. 10–11; Lapidge, 'Some Latin Poems', p. 70.

⁷ The only emendation not found in any of the earlier editions is 'transcurrere' for 'transcurrere'. My thanks to Neil Wright for suggesting this emendation. For a full discussion of my editorial decisions, see my 'Latin Acrostic Poetry'.

Lex etiam ut docuit typice portendere fraede ^d L [=Aelfred]	3
Flagrantique ^e simul moles mundi arserit igne F	4
Rex formasti his <i>sed</i> melius gnarum optime flammis R	5
Eripis atque chaos uincens Christe ipse necasti E	6
Diuino <i>super</i> astra frui <i>per</i> saecula uultu D ⁸	7
En <i>tibi</i> discendant e celo Gratiae tot Æ	8
Letus eris semper Ælfred <i>per</i> competi ate L [=leta]	9
Flectas ^f iam mentem sacris satiare sirela F [=faleris]	10
Recte doces <i>properans</i> falsa dulcidine mure R [=rerum]	11
Ecce aptas clara semper lucrare taltan E [=talenta]	12
Docte <i>peregrine</i> <i>transcurrere</i> ^g rura sophie D ⁹	13

- a. *Es* MS
- b. *erce* MS
- c. *reddes* MS
- d. *faede* MS
- e. *Flagrantice*MS
- f. *Fletas* MS
- g. *transcurre* MS

As we can see, the acrostics spell out AELFRED/ELFRED. The scribe of the Bern manuscript also presented the verses as forming telestichs – that is, words spelt by the final letters of the lines – which read as AELFRED/ÆLFRED. The poet had clearly sought to create these telestichs, jumbling up in various ways the spelling of words at the ends of lines 3, 9, 10, 11 and 12 in order to finish these verses with the required letter. The solutions to these anagrams are printed above in square brackets but, as one can see in Fig. 1, they are not found in the manuscript. It should be noted, furthermore, that even with the use of anagrams the poet did not fully achieve a telestich for either of the two spellings of Alfred's name; lines 4 to 7 and line 13 do not end with the required letters. To construct an acrostic and telestich while sustaining a hexametric structure is by no means easy and it is quite understandable that it proved to be so challenging for the poet.

⁸ 'My mind is to run through marvellous deeds: / From the stary citadel you [will] return readily, / Just as the law taught figuratively, to foretell Alfred, / At the same time the world's mass will burn in a blazing fire. / O King, you created, but from these flames more agreeably and most rightly the wise one / You rescue – and so triumphing, Christ, you yourself destroyed the chaos – / To enjoy the divine visage above the stars through the ages.' All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

⁹ 'Behold, may all the graces descend from heaven for you! / You will always be joyful, Alfred, through the happy crossroads [of life]. / May you now turn your mind and be satisfied with sacred adornments. / Rightly you teach, hastening away from the deceptive charm of worldly affairs. / See, you apply yourself always to gain bright talents, / To run wisely through the fields of foreign learning.'

It is not certain whether these thirteen verses represent a single text or two distinct poems and, indeed, there has been some variation in how editors have presented the verses.¹⁰ The first line, for instance, could be interpreted in one of two ways. Given its prefatory tone – stating that ‘my mind is to run through marvellous deeds’ – it could be referring to the following six lines, which complete the first spelling of the king’s name, yet it could also be referring to all twelve subsequent lines. The remaining verses, however, clearly divide into two, either as two stanzas of a single text or as two separate poems. The division between the two halves is marked not only by the two spellings of ‘Alfred’, but also by a change of addressee, content and rhythm. The final six lines solemnly address the king directly with heavy, spondaic feet, celebrating his piety with a mixture of future promises, hopeful jussives and admiration for his present life. The first seven lines, on the other hand, are at first more ambiguous – it is not immediately clear who the subject is – but they reveal themselves on line 6 to be an address to Christ, describing in vivid, dactylic hexameters how he will rescue Alfred on Judgement Day. Divided by contrasting tones and literary strategies, these thirteen verses are nevertheless presented as one continuous block of text in the manuscript and they are ultimately united in a shared goal: to praise the West Saxon king. It is possible that they are the product of one or more individuals, who in my view must remain anonymous, and there is merit in reading the two passages within their manuscript context as being in conversation. At the same time, however, within a courtly setting the performance of the two sets of hexameters may have been quite different from one another. In the following discussion I will refer to the two halves as two separate texts – the ‘first acrostic’ referring to the first seven lines and the ‘second acrostic’ referring to the remaining six lines.¹¹ For the sake of efficacy, meanwhile, I will refer to a single, anonymous poet.

Some possible sources and influences

Given that no earlier Latin acrostics survive that praise an Anglo-Saxon king, these verses arguably amount to nothing less than a historic cultural phenomenon. As such, it is important to ask how and why they were composed in late ninth-century England. In this respect, these verses need to be set within the framework of a burgeoning ‘court

¹⁰ While Hagen, Lindsay and Lapidge presented the acrostics as two distinct poems, Strecker published the verses as one entry, but with the two passages being numbered seemingly as two stanzas of a single text.

¹¹ For fuller discussion of the relationship between the two unequal halves of these acrostic verses, see my ‘Latin Acrostic Poetry’.

culture' in the 880s and 890s, which had emerged thanks to a highly centralized style of rulership and which offered a setting for learned and literary pursuits amidst a dilapidated ecclesiastical landscape.¹² From this context, we find a body of Alfredian literature in which the personal figure of the king is strikingly pervasive; and despite the fact that most texts within this corpus are in the vernacular, these Latin acrostics firmly belong within it. This is not to say that their author was a permanent member of the king's household – many individuals no doubt moved in and out of the royal circle on a fairly regular basis – but it is within this royal milieu that we should envisage their presentation and consumption.¹³

It is from this basis that we can begin to enquire about the sources that may have influenced the composition of the acrostics, which is my primary aim here. First, it should be noted that although there are no earlier acrostics praising Anglo-Saxon kings, there is nevertheless a history of acrostic composition in Anglo-Saxon England before the time of King Alfred. Latin examples survive, for example, by Aldhelm, Tatwine and Boniface,¹⁴ while the ninth-century vernacular poet Cynewulf incorporated autographic acrostics into his *Juliana*, *Christ II*, *Elene* and *Fates of the Apostles*.¹⁵ Anonymous Latin specimens can be identified at Theodore and Hadrian's school at Canterbury in the late

¹² For discussion of Alfredian 'court culture', see D. Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, 4th ser. 67 (Cambridge, 2007), esp. pp. 9–11; see also *idem*, 'Persuasion and Invention at the Court of King Alfred the Great', in C. Cubitt (ed.), *Court Culture in the Early Middle Ages: The Proceedings of the First Alcuin Conference*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 3 (Turnhout, 2003), pp. 189–221. For a recent overview of the ecclesiastical and political landscape of Alfred's reign, see S. Keynes, 'King Alfred and the Kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons', in N.G. Discenza and P.E. Szarmach (eds), *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 58 (Leiden, 2014), pp. 13–46.

¹³ There is, furthermore, the possibility that the poet sent the verses from afar. For the notion of poetic *absentia* (specifically in relation to Alcuin), see E.V. Thornbury, *Becoming a Poet in Anglo-Saxon England*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature 88 (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 86–7. That said, given the thematic connections that this poem has with several other Alfredian artefacts, I am inclined to believe that the poet had been present within the West Saxon royal milieu for some time. See below, pp. 288–91.

¹⁴ Aldhelm, *Carmen de uirginitate* praefatio, ed. R. Ehwald, *MGH AA* 15 (Berlin, 1919), pp. 350–2; *idem*, *Enigmata* praefatio, ed. Ehwald, *MGH AA* 15, pp. 97–9; Tatwine, *Enigmata*, ed. M. De Marco, *CCSL* 133 (Turnhout, 1968), pp. 165–208; Boniface, *Enigmata*, ed. De Marco, *CCSL* 133, pp. 273–343; *idem*, 'Poem to Nithardus', ed. M.R. James, 'St Boniface's Poem to Nithardus', *EHR* 29 (1914), p. 94. For discussion of the acrostics of these authors, see A. Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 8 (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 62, 165–6, 196, 199–200, 242 and 248–9. For more on Boniface's acrostics, also see U. Ernst, *Carmen Figuratum: Geschichte des Figurengedichts von den antiken Ursprüngen bis zum Ausgang des Mittelalters*, Pictura et Poësis 1 (Cologne, 1991), pp. 160–7.

¹⁵ For editions of these four poems by Cynewulf, see *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, ed. G.P. Krapp and E.V.K. Dobbie, 6 vols (New York, 1931–42), II, pp. 3–54 and 66–102, and III, pp. 15–27. For a recent discussion of Cynewulf's acrostics, see T. Birkett, 'Runes and *Revelatio*: Cynewulf's Signatures Reconsidered', *Review of English Studies* 65 (2014), pp. 771–89.

seventh century,¹⁶ and within the early ninth-century Book of Cerne.¹⁷ Acrostics in praise of Bede and Guthlac also may well have been composed in pre-tenth-century England.¹⁸ Several of these acrostics invoke prayers, others reveal the solutions to riddles, and many represent opportunities on the part of the poet to demonstrate and celebrate their own ingenuity. To limit our view of the Alfredian acrostics to the Anglo-Saxon world, however, would be a mistake; these verses belong equally, if not more so, to a wider European story. Acrostic and figural poetry had been a lively feature of Latin literary production in Carolingian Francia and, crucially, a significant portion of this material is in praise of secular rulers, unlike any of the earlier insular examples.¹⁹ Indeed, poets in the Carolingian realm – of which the Anglo-Saxon Alcuin was one of the most prolific – had embraced figural poetry as a distinct medium for the praise of Charlemagne and his successors. In doing so, they took their inspiration from a body of verse some four hundred years older, namely the poetry of Publilius Optatianus Porphyrius, who had composed such verses in honour of the Emperor Constantine.²⁰ The decision to celebrate King Alfred in Latin acrostics, therefore, was to embrace a literary form and language with the greatest Christian imperial pedigree possible.²¹

¹⁶ Orchard, *Poetic Art*, p. 196. D.R. Howlett has, however, argued for an Irish origin: 'Insular Acrostics, Celtic Latin Colophons', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 35 (1998), pp. 27–44, at pp. 27 and 44. See also P. Lendinara, 'The *Versus Sibyllae de die iudicii* in Anglo-Saxon England', in K. Powell and D. Scragg (eds), *Apocryphal Texts and Traditions in Anglo-Saxon England*, Publications of the Manchester Centre for Anglo-Saxon Studies 2 (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 85–101, at pp. 95–6; F. Alcaresi, 'The Sibylline Acrostic in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: The Augustinian Text and the Other Versions', in R.H. Bremmer and K. Dekker (eds), *Foundations of Learning: The Transfer of Encyclopaedic Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages*, Mediaevalia Groningana New Series 9: Storehouses of Wholesome Learning I (Paris, 2007), pp. 147–73, at pp. 152–8. This acrostic is a Latin translation (independent to that of Augustine of Hippo) of the acrostic of Book VIII of the Greek *Oracula Sibyllina*, which are discussed below, p. 291.

¹⁷ Cambridge, University Library, Ll.1.10. See M.P. Brown, *The Book of Cerne: Prayer, Patronage and Power in Ninth-Century England* (London, 1996), pp. 133–6.

¹⁸ The Guthlac acrostics, as mentioned above at n. 1, are preserved in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 307. They were added to the manuscript in the mid-tenth century. They are, however, severely corrupt, which suggests an earlier date for their composition. For the acrostic in praise of Bede, see Orchard, *Poetic Art*, pp. 274–7.

¹⁹ For a summary of this literary activity, see M. Garrison, 'The Emergence of Carolingian Latin Literature and the Court of Charlemagne (780–814)', in R. McKitterick (ed.), *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 111–40, at p. 122; Ernst, *Carmen Figuratum*, chs 6–8.

²⁰ For an edition of Porphyrius' figural poetry, see G. Polara (ed.), *Publilii Optatiani Porphyrii carmina*, Corpus Scriptorum Latinorum Paravianum, 2 vols (Turin, 1973). For Porphyrius and the influence of his poetry, see Ernst, *Carmen Figuratum*, pp. 95–142, 209–21 and *passim*. See also D. Schaller, 'Die karolingischen Figurengedichte des Cod. Bern. 212', in D. Schaller and H.R. Jaus (eds), *Medium Aevum Vivum: Festschrift für Walther Bulst* (Heidelberg, 1960), pp. 22–47; P. Godman, *Poets and Emperors: Frankish Politics and Carolingian Poetry* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 56–9.

²¹ An obvious parallel here is Asser's *Vita Alfredi regis*, which was inspired by Einhard's *Vita Karoli*.

We cannot be certain whether the composer of the Alfredian verses was inspired directly by Porphyrius' poetry, by a Carolingian precedent or by both – or, moreover, whether a late ninth-century Anglo-Saxon audience would have recognized their Constantinian and Carolingian associations. Although Porphyrius' acrostics had reached several ecclesiastical centres in England by the eighth century,²² this is not to say that they would have been available within the milieu of King Alfred. Indeed, there are no specific words or phrases within the Alfredian acrostics that strongly indicate knowledge of the poetry of Porphyrius. Likewise, it is unclear how much Carolingian poetry would have been in circulation, especially given the relatively limited transmission history of much of the extant corpus.²³ One can at least note the verses embedded in several of the letters from Alcuin to Charlemagne that were copied out in England around the year 900, found in what is now London, Lambeth Palace Library, 218.²⁴ In addition, it is clear that by the 930s an individual associated with the court of King Alfred's grandson, Æthelstan, was familiar with a poem in honour of Charlemagne by the 'Hibernicus Exul',²⁵ while at around the same time a copy of Hrabanus Maurus' figural poem, *In honorem sanctae crucis*, had made its way to Wessex.²⁶ Indeed, considering the sheer amount of evidence elsewhere for contact, movement and cultural influence between England and Francia in the late ninth century, to my mind a Frankish dimension is extremely likely. We might imagine, therefore, that such verses would have made fine gifts for the discerning reader interested in the recent past of Carolingian Francia.

Lexical echoes offer hints of other sources. Here it should be noted that the poet, particularly in the second acrostic passage, employs several curious phrases – one thinks especially of the 'happy crossroads', 'sacred

²² Bede at Wearmouth-Jarrow appears to have been familiar with Porphyrius' poetry, while Milred of Worcester makes reference to his poems in a letter: see respectively M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006) p. 321; P. Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600–800*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 3 (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 329–32. Alcuin appears to have been instrumental in introducing Porphyrius' poetry to the Carolingian court, implying that these poems may well have been available at York during the second half of the eighth century: see Schaller, 'Die karolingischen Figurengedichte'.

²³ For comments on the transmission of Carolingian Latin poetry, see P. Godman, 'Latin Poetry under Charles the Bald and Carolingian Poetry', in M.T. Gibson and J.L. Nelson (eds), *Charles the Bald: Court and Kingdom*, BAR International ser. 101 (Oxford, 1981), pp. 293–309, at pp. 294–5; Garrison, 'Emergence of Carolingian Latin Literature', esp. pp. 114, 127–8 and 136.

²⁴ See D. Ganz, 'An Anglo-Saxon Fragment of Alcuin's Letters in the Newberry Library, Chicago', *Anglo-Saxon England* 22 (1993), pp. 167–77.

²⁵ As first observed by W.H. Stevenson, 'A Latin Poem Addressed to King Athelstan', *EHR* 26 (1911), pp. 482–7, at p. 485.

²⁶ This manuscript survives as Cambridge, Trinity College, B.16.3. For discussion, see W. Schipper, 'Hrabanus Maurus in Anglo-Saxon England: *In honorem sanctae crucis*', in S. Baxter, C.E. Karkov, J.L. Nelson and D. Pelteret (eds), *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 283–98, at pp. 285–6.

adornments' and the 'fields of foreign learning' – the specific intended meanings of which are not entirely clear.²⁷ This uncertainty in part derives from the fact that these phrases may well be coinages of the poet, who in trying to achieve a double acrostic hexametric form was forced to create some rather ambiguous syntax and unusual expressions. There are, however, two phrases through which the 'remembered reading' of the poet may be visible.²⁸ First, we find in the twelfth verse *clara talenta*, which, as previous editors have highlighted,²⁹ appears to refer to the 'parable of the talents' in Matthew XXV.16. While the poet was no doubt alluding to this biblical passage, it should be noted that the use of *clara* with *talenta* together does not occur in the Vulgate passage in question; rather the only earlier instance of this collocation that I have been able to identify is in Prudentius' poem on Saint Hippolytus in his *Liber Peristephanon*, in which this phrase is used to describe the ornamentation of Hippolytus' shrine.³⁰ The transmission and use of small phrases such as this do not necessarily depend on knowledge of a full text; glossaries, florilegia and other intermediary textual and oral sources could account for familiarity with a given idiosyncratic expression, while we cannot discount the possibility that the poet coined this phrase anew. That said, numerous authors writing in England during the Anglo-Saxon period were familiar with the poetry of Prudentius.³¹ A second lexical clue comes from the phrase *arcis astrifera* in the second verse. This term denotes the oft-cited idea of the heavenly citadel, yet the specific use of these two words is rather rare. I am aware of only three earlier instances: in Aldhelm's *Carmen de uirginate*, in the ninth-century *Carmen de s. Quintino* and, interestingly, in a poem in praise of Charlemagne by the 'Hibernicus Exul' (but not the aforementioned poem by the 'Hibernicus Exul')

²⁷ Compare the contrasting points of interpretation offered by Lapidge's and my own translations. For further discussion, see my 'Latin Acrostic Poetry'. Note that the syntax of line 10 is particularly ambiguous, in which we find 'sacris . . . faleris'. One might also note here that I agree with Lapidge in reading 'per competa leta' as a figurative reference to the journey of life; thus it is arguably comparable with numerous references to *uia* within the Vulgate Psalms.

²⁸ For the concept of 'remembered reading' in Latin verse, see Orchard, *Poetic Art*, esp. ch. 4. My identification of lexical links between the Alfredian acrostic and earlier literature has been enabled by the Brepolis Latin Cross Database Searchtool (accessed via <http://www.brepolis.net>).

²⁹ Strecker, *Poetae*, p. 1078; Lapidge, 'Some Latin Poems', p. 70.

³⁰ Prudentius, *Liber Peristephanon*, II, line 188, ed. M.P. Cunningham, *Aurelii Prudentii Clementis carmina*, CCL 126 (Turnhout, 1966), p. 376. Note that this verse is a pentameter, within which the placement of 'clara' and 'talenta' does not correspond entirely with their use in the Alfredian acrostic, suggesting that these words were not used by the Alfredian poet simply as a form of 'lexical localization'. For Anglo-Saxon knowledge of this text, see Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Library*, p. 330. For an introduction to 'lexical localization', in reference particularly to the work of Aldhelm, see Orchard, *Poetic Art*, pp. 98–102.

³¹ Orchard, *Poetic Art*, pp. 172–8. Eight manuscripts survive with Anglo-Saxon provenances that contain Prudentius' *Liber Peristephanon* (though not all of these, at least as they are preserved, include the poem on Saint Hippolytus). Several more surviving manuscripts with Anglo-Saxon provenances feature other works by Prudentius. See Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon Library*, pp. 328–31.

that can be associated with King Æthelstan's court).³² As the *Carmen de uirginitate* is the earliest of these three texts, *arcs astrifera* appears, therefore, to be a coinage of Aldhelm, an author whose works were read widely and whose phraseology in particular was deeply influential on later generations of Latin writers, especially in the insular world.³³ That the composer of this verse may have been familiar with the writings of Aldhelm is not surprising.³⁴

Possible influences are also suggested by the somewhat murkier evidence of shared themes and concepts. In this regard, we can identify several features particularly in the treatment of Alfred's kingship that bring us back within the West Saxon royal milieu. First, there is the clear relationship in both the first and second acrostic between Alfred and wisdom. The king is directly praised in the second passage for his rejection of worldly concerns in favour of spiritual nourishment. In the first acrostic, meanwhile, this relationship is implied with the notion of the 'divine visage' and with the word *gnarus* ('wise one'), which appears to be referring to Alfred himself. The praise heaped on Alfred in these verses is of a king seeking not earthly riches and success, but the true understanding and vision that only wisdom can provide; Alfred is, in other words, a decidedly Solomonic king. As David Pratt has noted, the reference within the acrostics to sight and its implicit emphasis on the impermanence of worldly wealth has echoes in several other Alfredian artefacts.³⁵ Sight, for example, is a key theme in both the *Old English Soliloquies* and within the iconography of the Fuller Brooch.³⁶ In his

³² Aldhelm, *Carmen de uirginitate*, line 1770, ed. Ehwald, p. 426; *Carmen de s. Quintino*, descriptio, lines 3–4, ed. P. von Winterfeld, *MGH Poetae Latini aevi Carolini* 4.1 (Berlin, 1899), p. 198; *Hibernicus Exul. Carmen* 19, line 13, ed. E. Dümmler, *MGH Poetae Latini aevi Carolini* 1 (Berlin, 1881), p. 408.

³³ For the legacy of Aldhelm's writings in Anglo-Saxon England, see Orchard, *Poetic Art*, pp. 239–83.

³⁴ It should also be noted that while all three of these earlier instances of *arcs astrifera* occur within hexameter verses, it is only in the Aldhelmian line that we find either *arcs* or *astrifera* occupying the same part of the hexameter as in the Alfredian acrostic. As in the Alfredian acrostic, *astrifera* in Aldhelm's verse is in the ablative and it occupies the entirety of the second foot and the arsis of the third foot. In the use of *astrifera*, the Alfredian poet may, therefore, have been enacting an instance of 'lexical localization'.

³⁵ Pratt, *Political Thought*, pp. 335–6; *idem*, 'Kings and Books in Anglo-Saxon England', pp. 315–16.

³⁶ Pratt, *Political Thought*, pp. 317–32; *idem*, 'Persuasion and Invention', pp. 206–20. Note that the late ninth-century authenticity of several pieces of 'Alfredian' vernacular literature has recently been questioned by Malcolm Godden. I, however, remain optimistic that these texts were composed in the late ninth century. See M. Godden, 'Did King Alfred Write Anything?', *Medium Aevum* 76 (2007), pp. 1–23; *idem*, 'The Alfredian Project and its Aftermath: Rethinking the Literary History of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries', in 2008 *Lectures*, Proceedings of the British Academy 162 (2009), pp. 93–122. Cf. J. Bately, 'Did King Alfred Actually Translate Anything? The Integrity of the Alfredian Canon Revisited', *Medium Aevum* 78 (2009), pp. 189–215; *idem*, 'Alfred as Author and Translator', in Discenza and Szarmach (eds), *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, pp. 113–42; see also D. Pratt, 'Problems of Authorship and Audience in the Writings of King Alfred the Great', in P. Wormald and J.L. Nelson (eds), *Lay Intellectuals in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 162–91.

biography of the king, meanwhile, Asser directly compares Alfred to Solomon,³⁷ while in the preface to the *Old English Pastoral Care*, the king's lament concerning the state of learning in England perpetuates this same model of the king as a lover of wisdom.³⁸

Further parallels can be drawn in terms of the emphasis on Alfred's moral leadership. In the second acrostic, the poet makes a fleeting reference to Alfred as a teacher with the phrase 'recte doces' ('rightly you teach'). In the first acrostic, the poet stresses the king's exceptional status on a much grander scale, by establishing a relationship between Alfred and Christ. We see this simply in the fact that Christ is addressed in a poem that is flanked by the name 'Alfred' and with the suggestion that Christ will save Alfred on Judgement Day; yet more profoundly, the poet also appears to elevate their relationship to that of two comparable figures. This is done through the suspension of the name of the addressee, Christ, until the sixth line of the poem. Up to this point, it is unclear quite who the judge (*arbiter*) or he who teaches (*docere*) is – and this could well be intentional, since these are both roles that Alfred inhabits in a variety of other contemporary artefacts. For instance, prescriptive and descriptive accounts of Alfredian kingship – represented by the first royal *ordo*, with which Alfred was consecrated, and by Asser's biography – place great emphasis on the king as a just judge;³⁹ the prose preface to *Old English Pastoral Care*, meanwhile, positions Alfred as a spiritual guide and teacher.⁴⁰ Ultimately, however, the role to which the first acrostic may well be alluding is that of God's representative on earth, of Alfred as an earthly Christ. Both J.M. Wallace-Hadrill and Richard Abels have argued for such a

³⁷ Asser, *Vita Alfredi regis*, c. 76, ed. W.H. Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred, Together with the Annals of Saint Neots, Erroneously Ascribed to Asser* (Oxford, 1904), p. 61.

³⁸ For more on the Solomonic dimension to Alfredian kingship, see A. Scharer, *Herrschaft und Repräsentation: Studien zur Hofkultur König Alfreds des Großen*, Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung 36 (Vienna, 2000), pp. 83–7; Pratt, *Political Thought*, pp. 151–66 and 170–6; F. Leneghan, 'Royal Wisdom and the Alfredian Context of *Cynewulf and Cynebeard*', *ASE* 39 (2010), pp. 71–104, at pp. 83–91.

³⁹ Asser, *Vita Alfredi regis*, c. 106, ed. Stevenson, pp. 92–3: 'erat . . . rex ille in exequendis iudiciis, sicut in ceteris aliis omnibus rebus, discretissimus indagator. Nam omnia pene totius suae regionis iudicia, quae in absentia sua fiebant, sagaciter inuestigabat, qualia fierent, iusta aut etiam iniusta' ('the king was an extremely astute investigator in judicial matters as in everything else. He would carefully look into nearly all the judgements which were passed in his absence anywhere in his realm, to see whether they were just or unjust', trans. S. Keynes and M. Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (London, 1983), p. 109). 'The First Royal *Ordo*', ed. L.G. Wickham Legg, *English Coronation Records* (London, 1901), p. 6: 'Viuat inter gentium cateruas magnanimus. Sit in iudiciis aequitas singularis' ('May he live magnanimous amongst the bands of nations. May he be outstanding justice in judgements').

⁴⁰ *Old English Pastoral Care*, ed. and trans. H. Sweet, EETS, o.s. 45 and 50 (London, 1871), pp. 2–9.

Christological imagining of kingship in Alfred's law codes and the *Old English Pastoral Care*,⁴¹ and it is perhaps also present in the iconography of the Alfred Jewel.⁴²

Such Solomonic and Christological meditations on kingship are not unique to late ninth-century Wessex, but the frequency with which they appear in contemporary material suggests that the composer of the acrostics was familiar with the ideas being developed at and emanating from the West Saxon royal court. With this thematic dimension, however, and with the aforementioned literary and lexical hints of influence, the key question must be: which, if any, of these sources represent intentional allusions? Any answer relies to a degree on intuition; we can but weigh up the likelihood of intentionality against the factors of how easily identifiable a source would have been and what function an intentional allusion may have served. For instance, I believe that the fundamental decision to compose a praise poem in Latin and in the form of an acrostic was a conscious act of Carolingian (and possibly Constantinian) emulation – and this association is highly suggestive of the cultural capital that these verses would have possessed for their composer and subject. As to the vocabulary that we have seen so far, it seems assured, considering the fundamental importance of the Bible to medieval Christendom, that the poet was indeed seeking to refer to the biblical 'parable of the talents'; in doing so, the poet was encouraging Alfred to expend his energies wisely. The lexical echoes of works by Prudentius and Aldhelm, on the other hand, are small and inconclusive. Moreover, they do not appear to be conceptually meaningful. Instead, they are indications of the possible range of literature with which the poet was familiar and, more compellingly, they are useful case studies for considering the compositional technique and priorities of the poet. Finally, as to the thematic parallels with other Alfredian material, we see that the poet was embracing and replicating visions of kingship that contemporaries (not least, the king himself) were articulating in other media – strikingly, for the most part in another language (Old English). Such are the frequency and prominence of these themes within the acrostics that it is highly likely that the poet was quite aware of their poignancy in an Alfredian milieu. In turn, these thematic strands indicate that the primary context in which these verses were to be

⁴¹ J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England on the Continent: The Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford in Hilary Term 1970* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 144–5; R. Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, *The Medieval World* (London, 1998), pp. 250–1.

⁴² See D.R. Howlett, 'The Iconography of the Alfred Jewel', *Oxoniensia* 39 (1974), pp. 44–52. For brief further comments on the possible thematic consistencies between the Bern acrostics and the Alfred Jewel, see M. Hilmo, *Medieval Images, Icons, and Illustrated English Literary Texts: From the Ruthwell Cross to the Ellesmere Chaucer* (Ashgate, 2004), pp. 66–8.

consumed acted as a source of influence in their composition; there was, in other words, a dynamic relationship between poet and audience.

The Sibylline acrostic

These varying sources of influence set the scene for a crucial yet hitherto unrecognized textual model for understanding the first of the Alfredian acrostics – a model that had a decisive impact on the structure, themes and vocabulary that the poet chose to employ. This is the ‘Sibylline acrostic’, a poetic tradition with a long and rich history, to which the first seven lines in praise of Alfred represent a distinct Anglo-Saxon contribution.

The Sibyls were a group of ancient Greek pagan prophetesses and a source of enduring fascination for ancient and medieval authors.⁴³ References to various Sibyls can be found, for instance, in the writings of Plato, Cicero, Varro, Virgil, Augustine of Hippo and Isidore of Seville. Interest in these prophetesses was sustained largely thanks to their prediction of the birth of Christ and of his second coming on Judgement Day. The source for much of the Sibylline tradition is the *Oracula Sibyllina*, a set of Greek hexameters divided into several books, which included in the eighth book a thirty-four line acrostic that described in dramatic detail the return of Christ and the destruction of the world.⁴⁴ This Greek poem was translated on numerous occasions into Latin, most notably by Augustine of Hippo, who included a translation within his *De ciuitate Dei* that – unlike some other renderings – sought to retain the acrostic hexametric form.⁴⁵ Augustine’s poem was evidently popular, being incorporated into several later works, including Quodvultdeus’ *Sermo contra Iudaeos, paganos et Arianos*, the Homiliary of Paul the Deacon and Hrabanus Maurus’ *De uniuerso*; it would also be transmitted as an independent text. The Sibylline tradition – and more specifically, the Sibylline acrostic – would find application in a variety of liturgical,

⁴³ A sizeable body of scholarship exists on various aspects of the Sibylline tradition. For overviews, see B. McGinn, ‘Teste David cum Sibylla: The Significance of the Sibylline Tradition in the Middle Ages’, in J. Kirshner and S.F. Wemples (eds), *Women of the Medieval World* (1988), pp. 7–35; J.J. Collins, ‘The Development of the Sibylline Tradition’, in W. Haase and H. Temporini (eds), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* 20.1 (Berlin, 1987), pp. 421–59; A. Holdenried, *The Sibyl and Her Scribes: Manuscripts and Interpretation of the Latin Sibylla Tiburtina c. 1050–1500*, Church, Faith and Culture in the Medieval West (Aldershot, 2006), esp. ch. 3.

⁴⁴ The Greek acrostic can be found in J. Geffcken (ed.), *Die Oracula Sibyllina*, Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte 8 (Leipzig, 1902), pp. 153–7. For an English translation by J.J. Collins, see J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Vol. 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (New York, 1983), pp. 423–4. Both the text and translation of the Greek acrostic are reprinted in Lendinara, ‘The *Versus Sibyllae de die iudicii*’, pp. 87–8.

⁴⁵ Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* XVIII.23, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, CCSL 48 (Turnhout, 1955), pp. 613–14. For the text of Augustine’s acrostic, see the appendix below.

theological, pedagogical and political contexts throughout the medieval period, attesting to the fundamental importance of eschatological and Christological thought to many medieval minds.

That the composition of the first Alfredian acrostic was inspired by the Sibylline tradition is suggested by a number of points. Most fundamentally, we are dealing with a description of Judgement Day set within the framework of a hexametric acrostic. In addition, Christ is prominent in both the Alfredian and the Sibylline texts, with each poem telling us in its second verse that he ('the king') will return from heaven.⁴⁶ In both the *Oracula Sibyllina* and Augustine's translation, Christ's name is spelt out in the acrostic; the Alfredian poet, on the other hand, names Alfred within its acrostic and telestich. This, as I have already noted, appears to imply a Christological vision of West Saxon kingship – a point that is also suggested by the fact that at the opening of the Alfredian acrostic the addressee is first named simply as an *arbiter*; similar emphasis on judgement is stressed at the beginning of the Sibylline acrostic. Indeed, here and elsewhere in the poem, comparison with Augustine's Latin rendering is particularly fruitful, as vocabulary and its relative placement within the internal structure of the poem reinforce these echoes. Although Augustine does not use the term *arbiter*, the opening word of his poem is *iudicium*; this is followed on the third and sixth lines by the verb *iudicare*. Elsewhere, in describing the destruction of the world both Augustine and the Alfredian poet refer to *astrae*, *ignis* and *flammae*; most strikingly of all, nearing the end of their poems both authors employ the term *chaos*.⁴⁷ Collectively, these thematic, structural and lexical parallels make for a compelling relationship with the Sibylline acrostic, particularly with Augustine's adaptation.⁴⁸ The Alfredian poet was, I believe, consciously alluding to this earlier work.

⁴⁶ With regard to the Greek acrostic, it should be noted that in manuscripts the first line can be found preceded by a rubric (Lendinara, 'The *Versus Sibyllae de die iudicii*', p. 87 n. 12). As Collins has stressed, this rubric is not a line in the poem but is its title: *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, p. 423, n. h2. The reference to the 'king' (βασιλευς) is on the second line following this rubric. In Augustine's translation, the reference to the *rex* is likewise in the second verse.

⁴⁷ *Chaos* is a relatively unusual term in early medieval Latin literature, though it is found in the works of many classical and patristic Latin authors. For a discussion of its use and range of semantic meaning in classical and medieval literature, see C.A. Jones, 'Early Medieval *Chaos*', in A. Harbus and R. Poole (eds), *Verbal Encounters: Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Studies for Roberta Frank*, Toronto Old English Series 13 (Toronto, 2005), pp. 15–38.

⁴⁸ Here it should be reiterated that Augustine was not the only individual to translate the Sibylline acrostic into Latin and other versions can be found in Anglo-Saxon contexts. For a survey of other translations with Anglo-Saxon connections, see Alcamesi, 'The *Sibylline Acrostic* in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts'. Of the differing Latin translations of which I am aware, in terms of structure and vocabulary the Augustinian rendering offers the closest parallels with the Alfredian acrostic. I believe that the poet was writing with Augustine's text in mind – a scenario that seems especially likely given the wide circulation of the Augustinian version.

What, then, inspired the poet to turn to the Sibylline acrostic? Its form would have made it immediately attractive, given the aforementioned Constantinian and Carolingian associations that Latin acrostics possessed. Its inclusion in *De ciuitate Dei* possibly enhanced its Carolingian aura, since Einhard had recalled that Augustine's work was a particular favourite of Charlemagne.⁴⁹ The poet was also possibly aware of earlier literature that praised or criticized kings within an eschatological discourse, such as the anonymous vision of King Æthelbald of Mercia burning in hell or Walahfrid Strabo's description of Charlemagne in hell;⁵⁰ the poet was perhaps even aware of earlier political appropriations of the Sibylline tradition in such a vein.⁵¹ Indeed, in this respect, the penultimate line of the Sibylline acrostic is particularly significant, stating as it was rendered by Augustine that 'et coram hic Domino reges sistentur ad unum' ('and here all kings will be caused to stand in the presence of the Lord'). The Alfredian text suggests this same sentiment, telling Alfred (likewise in the penultimate verse) that he will be saved. By doing so, the poet transformed what was originally a prophetic warning into a backdrop for the ultimate form of kingly praise – Christ's approval of Alfred as a man and king.

The appeal of the Sibylline acrostic would no doubt have been strengthened by the fact that the poet could have expected at least some within the West Saxon royal circle to recognize the allusion. Here we should note the abundance of evidence for knowledge of the Sibylline acrostic – and the Sibylline tradition more generally – in neighbouring ninth-century Francia. Augustine's *De ciuitate Dei* was well known to many scholars there,⁵² and knowledge of the Sibyls would have been supplemented by their discussion in such texts as Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* and Hrabanus Maurus' *De uniuerso* (which, as I have already noted, includes Augustine's acrostic). By the end of the century, the Augustinian acrostic had even been set to

⁴⁹ Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, c. 24, ed O. Holder-Egger, *MGH SRG* 25 (Hanover, 1911), p. 29. Within an Alfredian context, Einhard's biography was known at the very least by Asser, who used this text in the writing of his biography of King Alfred. See Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, pp. 54–5, 222 n. 115 and p. 254 n. 139.

⁵⁰ For an introduction to this phenomenon, see D. Ganz, 'Charlemagne in Hell', *Florilegium* 17 (2000), pp. 175–94.

⁵¹ One should note that the Alfredian poet was neither the first nor the last individual to appreciate the potential of the Sibylline tradition for praise and damnation of royalty. See, for example, McGinn, 'Teste David cum Sibylla', p. 23; L. Roach, 'The Legacy of a Late Antique Prophecy: The Tiburtine Sibyl and the Italian Opposition to Otto III', *The Mediaeval Journal* 5 (2015), pp. 1–33. Holdenried, however, is keen to stress that medieval engagement with the Sibylline tradition was not exclusively driven by political interests; see Holdenried, *The Sibyl and Her Scribes*, pp. xvii–xxi and *passim*.

⁵² For recent discussion of the reception of Augustinian literature in ninth-century Francia, see C. Weidmann, 'Augustine's Works in Circulation', in M. Vessey (ed.), *A Companion to Augustine*, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World (Chichester, 2012), pp. 431–49 and C. Leyser, 'Augustine in the Latin West, 430–ca. 900', in Vessey (ed.), *A Companion to Augustine*, pp. 450–64.

music.⁵³ The evidence for knowledge of the Sibyls in Alfredian England is far thinner, despite the fact that an unusually large number of versions of the Sibylline acrostic survive in manuscripts with Anglo-Saxon provenances.⁵⁴ We have a contemporary incomplete copy of Isidore's *Etymologiae*, the script of which suggests that it was produced within the sphere of influence of the West Saxon royal court.⁵⁵ Within the list of possible sources available to the authors of the *Old English Soliloquies* and the *Old English Orosius*, meanwhile, we find both Isidore's *Etymologiae* and Augustine's *De ciuitate Dei*.⁵⁶ These are but hints of knowledge, yet the wealth of evidence from contemporary Francia alone is a good indicator that at least some individuals at Alfred's court would have been familiar with the Sibylline tradition. As Asser tells us, Alfred had invited numerous scholars from Francia to his court in order to enhance learning and it is highly likely that these individuals would have brought literature with them.⁵⁷ This is a point strongly supported by the range of texts found in manuscripts that were produced in England during the late ninth and early tenth centuries.⁵⁸ Not only would at least some of these scholars have been able to recognize the Sibylline allusion, but they also could have explained its significance to those around them, in what no doubt would have been a socially powerful demonstration of intellect.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence, however, for contemporary Anglo-Saxon knowledge of the Sibylline tradition comes from Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 173, fols 57–83, an eighth-century Southumbrian manuscript that on its final three surviving pages contains, as the rubric reads, 'uaticinia sibilae' ('Sibylline prophecies'),

⁵³ See S. Barrett, 'Music and Writing: On the Composition of Paris Bibliothèque Nationale lat. 1154', *Early Music History* 16 (1997), pp. 55–96.

⁵⁴ For a general overview of the Sibylline acrostic and its reception in Anglo-Saxon England, see Lendinara, 'The *Versus Sibyllae de die iudicii*'; for a survey of the manuscript evidence, see Alcamesi, 'The *Sibylline Acrostic* in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts'.

⁵⁵ M.B. Parkes, 'A Fragment of an Early-Tenth-Century Anglo-Saxon Manuscript and its Significance', *ASE* 12 (1983), pp. 129–40, repr. in and cited from his *Scribes, Scripts and Readers: Studies in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemination of Medieval Texts* (London, 1991), pp. 171–85, at p. 173. Cf. D.N. Dumville, 'English Square Minuscule Script: The Background and Earliest Phases', *ASE* 16 (1987), pp. 147–79, at p. 170; D. Ganz, 'Square Minuscule', in R. Gameson (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, 1: 400–1100*, The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain 1 (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 188–96.

⁵⁶ R. Jayatilaka, 'King Alfred and his Circle', in Gameson (ed.), *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, 1: 400–1100*, pp. 670–8, at pp. 672 and 675–6. This is not to say, however, that the authors of the *Old English Soliloquies* and the *Old English Orosius* knew *De ciuitate Dei* in its entirety: see L. Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies in the Vernacular and Latin Traditions*, Toronto Anglo-Saxon Series 8 (Toronto, 2011), pp. 216–17.

⁵⁷ Asser, *Vita Alfredi regis*, c. 78, ed. Stevenson, p. 63.

⁵⁸ For example, manuscripts containing the commentary of Remigius of Auxerre on Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* (Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepys Library, 2981 (5)) and the aforementioned letters by Alcuin (London, Lambeth Palace Library, 218). For the former, see Parkes, 'A Fragment of an Early-Tenth-Century Anglo-Saxon Manuscript'; for the latter, see Ganz, 'An Anglo-Saxon Fragment'.

including the acrostic as it is found in *De ciuitate Dei*.⁵⁹ Crucially, in the later ninth or early tenth century an inscription was added to the top of what was presumably the first page of the manuscript, reading 'FRIDESTAN diacon'. A deacon of this name witnessed two royal diplomas of Edward the Elder that were issued in 904, both of which were produced in favour of the bishop of Winchester and his Old Minster, while the bishop of Winchester between 909 and 931 also went by the name Frithestan.⁶⁰ It has often been suspected that the deacon of Corpus Christi 173, the deacon of the Edwardian charters and the bishop of Winchester were one and the same individual,⁶¹ and given that beyond this early tenth-century context no Anglo-Saxon is known to have possessed this name,⁶² this scenario seems likely. We appear to be dealing, therefore, with a set of Sibylline texts with an early tenth-century Winchester provenance.

I would contend that the poet was not only inspired by the Sibylline acrostic, but was intentionally alluding to it – purposefully enacting, as it were, a moment of intertextuality. Thus, we might speculate what impact this Sibylline dimension added to the performance of the Alfredian acrostic. Given the very visual nature of an acrostic and the aural qualities that metrical verse could possess, we should imagine that in the presentation of such literature, the words of the text would have been both seen and heard.⁶³ In this performance did the presenter explicitly draw attention to the Sibylline parallels? Would they perhaps even have taken on the role of the Sibyl?⁶⁴ The notion of a pagan prophetess prophesying Alfred's salvation may have struck a particularly

⁵⁹ For fuller discussion of the Sibylline material in this manuscript, see Alcamesi, 'The Sibylline Acrostic in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts', pp. 159–62. Note that this material includes two independent Latin translations of the Greek acrostic. One is that of Augustine (with a few minor variant readings); the other represents an independent translation. Note that this second version does not form an acrostic.

⁶⁰ S 372, ed. W. de Gray Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum: A Collection of Charters Relating to Anglo-Saxon History*, 3 vols (London, 1885–1899), II, no. 613, p. 276; S 374, ed. S. Miller, *Charters of the New Minster, Winchester*, Anglo-Saxon Charters 9 (Oxford, 2001), no. 7, p. 42.

⁶¹ M.B. Parkes, 'The Palaeography of the Parker Manuscript of the *Chronicle*, Laws and Sedulius, and Historiography at Winchester in the Late Ninth and Tenth Centuries', *ASE* 5 (1976), pp. 149–71, repr. in and cited from his *Scribes, Scripts and Readers*, pp. 140–69, at p. 159; M. Lapidge, 'Schools, Learning and Literature in Tenth-Century England', *Settimane* 38 (1991), pp. 951–98, repr. in and cited from his *Anglo-Latin Literature 900–1066*, pp. 1–48, at p. 14.

⁶² As catalogued within the *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England* (<http://www.pase.ac.uk/>).

⁶³ As I have stressed elsewhere: Gallagher, 'Latin Acrostic Poetry'. Also see D.H. Green, *Medieval Listening and Reading: The Primary Reception of German Literature 800–1300* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 131–4, 180 and 356 n. 139.

⁶⁴ Here it should be noted that the surviving literature from Anglo-Saxon England has often been excluded from discussions of early drama. For recent arguments for greater consideration of this material, see M. Bradford Bedingfield, *The Dramatic Liturgy of Anglo-Saxon England*, Anglo-Saxon Studies 1 (Woodbridge, 2002); A.J. Frantzen, 'Drama and Dialogue in Old English Poetry: The Scene of Cynewulf's *Juliana*', *Theatre Survey* 48 (2007), pp. 99–119; F.J. Finan, 'Drama without Performance and Two Old English Anomalies', *Mediævalia* 35 (2014), pp. 23–50.

strong chord with a king who had spent much of his reign combating Viking aggressors – individuals who are consistently referred to as *pagani* in the major Latin text to survive from his reign, Asser's biography of King Alfred.⁶⁵ Such a dramatic performance would, furthermore, have only been enhanced by the fact that the verses were in Latin, a language that would have been deeply familiar through liturgy and royal diplomas, but which may have struck some as a somewhat unusual – and rather Carolingian – medium through which to praise the king, especially in verse. We should also not forget the manuscript setting in which the acrostics are preserved. As we have seen, the acrostics were copied out by a roughly contemporary hand into a gospelbook, though given the corruption of several aspects of the verses, this witness is unlikely to represent the original context in which the acrostics were first presented to the king. Even so, the Sibylline theme continues to be extremely apt when one remembers that the popularity of the Sibylline tradition had been in part due to, in the words of Anke Holdenried, its 'independent non-Christian confirmation of the truth of the Gospel'.⁶⁶ The placement of this acrostic within a gospelbook, therefore, enhanced both the Christological framing of Alfredian kingship and its claim concerning Alfred's personal salvation.

Conclusion

In considering the sources that influenced the composition of the Alfredian acrostics, we gain a deeper understanding of how and why these verses were composed; by understanding the network of cultural references and historical circumstances in which the poet wrote, the verses begin to make more sense. As we have seen, the linguistic and literary decisions made by the poet to an extent appear to have been following Carolingian precedent, while the poet also appears to have been well attuned to the cultural output of the West Saxon royal milieu. These two influences are wholly appropriate together, given the considerable evidence elsewhere that many of the intellectual interests present in late ninth-century England were inspired by Carolingian developments; one might even say that one of these interests was the Carolingians themselves. While the adoption of the Latin acrostic for kingly praise was, therefore, entirely in keeping with the cultural interests of the Alfredian court, both the form and language of these

⁶⁵ J.L. Nelson, 'England and the Continent: II, the Vikings and Others', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser. 13 (2003), pp. 1–28, at p. 6; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 230 n. 12. It should be noted that contemporary accounts of the Vikings in the 'common stock' of the vernacular *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* were less consistent in referring to the Vikings as pagans.

⁶⁶ Holdenried, *The Sibyl and Her Scribes*, p. xxi.

verses were, nevertheless, unusual in a late ninth-century Anglo-Saxon context – and the poet no doubt would have been aware of the exceptionality of such literature, which served only to enhance the status and value of the acrostics.

The source criticism that this discussion has undertaken does not allow us to reveal the identity of the poet, but the findings do allow us to see the imprint of authorial learning. Providing clues as to the education of the poet, we must then assess which, if any, of these pieces of evidence are likely to amount to deliberate allusion, which of these sources are likely to have enhanced the performance of the text, and which are most telling about the cultural aspirations of the poet and of the milieu in which these acrostics were composed and consumed. The evocation of a ‘Solomonic’ ideology of kingship that abounded in contemporary media would have been pleasing to a West Saxon audience – not least, the king himself – and it points towards a poet engaged with the visions and discussions of the royal milieu. Of the influences detectable in these verses, however, the most remarkable is undoubtedly that of the Sibylline tradition. Here we find the poet imaginatively appropriating an earlier text that touches on the theme of the judgement of kings while sustaining the Latin acrostic form – an earlier text, in other words, that makes great sense as a model for Carolingian-inspired kingly praise. By drawing on the Sibylline tradition, the poem brings an apocalyptic dimension to the fore in discussions of Alfred’s personal qualities and rule, implicitly judging Alfred alongside all other kings from history and marking him out as worthy of salvation. It is a superlative moment of praise, a mighty statement compacted into just seven lines of verse, and a striking Anglo-Saxon contribution to medieval visions of kingship at the end of days.⁶⁷ For us, moreover, the identification of this textual model is particularly interesting for its possible implications as to how Latin verse may have been performed and consumed at the West Saxon royal court: a succinct moment of drama, a visual and metrical declaration, set in the language of the Bible, invoking ancient pagan prophecy, and placing the personal character of King Alfred within a universal narrative. As such, the Alfredian acrostics and their sources offer an important point of comparison for considering the performative qualities and cultural capital of other Latin (and vernacular) literature that may be considered in a West Saxon royal context.

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⁶⁷ Medieval eschatology and apocalypticism have been the subject of numerous studies in recent years. See, for example, J.T. Palmer, *The Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2014); and various essays in W. Brandes, F. Schmieder and R. Voß (eds), *Peoples of the Apocalypse: Eschatological Belief and Political Scenarios*, Millennium-Studien/Millennium Studies 63 (Berlin, 2016).

Appendix

The Sibylline acrostic of Augustine of Hippo

Here I include the Sibylline acrostic as it is found in Augustine of Hippo's *De ciuitate Dei*. As stated above, this represents a translation of a Greek acrostic and although it was probably the most widely circulated Latin rendering of the Greek, Augustine's version is not the only one to exist. The structural and lexical parallels are particularly strong between the Augustinian and Alfredian acrostics, making it most likely that Augustine's text was the version that the Alfredian poet had in mind.

Iudicii signum tellus sudore madescet.
 E caelo rex adueniet per saecula futurus,
 Scilicet ut carnem praesens, ut iudicet orbem.
 Vnde Deum cernent incredulus atque fidelis
 Celsum cum sanctis aeui iam termino in ipso.
 Sic animae cum carne aderunt, quas iudicat ipse,
 Cum iacet incultus densis in uepribus orbis.
 Reicient simulacra uiri, cunctam quoque gazam,
 Exuret terras ignis pontumque polumque
 Inquirens, taetri portas effringet Auerni.
 Sanctorum sed enim cunctae lux libera carni
 Tradetur, sontes aeterna flamma cremabit.
 Occultos actus retegens tunc quisque loquetur
 Secreta, atque Deus reserabit pectora luci.
 Tunc erit et luctus, stridebunt dentibus omnes.
 Eripitur solis iubar et chorus interit astris.
 Voluetur caelum, lunaris splendor obibit;
 Deiciet colles, ualles extollet ab imo.
 Non erit in rebus hominum sublime uel altum.
 Iam aequantur campis montes et caerula ponti
 Omnia cessabunt, tellus confracta peribit:
 Sic pariter fontes torrentur fluminaque igni.
 Sed tuba tum sonitum tristem demittet ab alto
 Orbe, gemens facinus miserum uariosque labores,
 Tartareumque chaos monstrabit terra dehiscens.
 Et coram hic Domino reges sistentur ad unum.
 Reccidet e caelo ignisque et sulphuris amnis.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Augustine, *De ciuitate Dei* XVIII.23, ed. Dombart and Kalb, pp. 613–14.