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‘Hu mæg ure geferscipe beon gewissod butan geþeahtere?’ Ælfric’s Colloquy and Latin Learning in Anglo-Saxon England

It is a commonplace that the Anglo-Saxons had a poor record in learning Latin. Following the destruction of so many monasteries in the viking raids of the ninth and early tenth centuries, scholarship does indeed appear to have taken a back-seat. Remarks concerning the low standard of literacy such as those by King Alfred, and later on by the monastic reformers of the tenth century, have been taken by modern writers as evidence that at times the Anglo-Saxons inhabited somewhat of a cultural backwater.[1] More detailed research, while accepting that Latin literacy was at times abysmal, has emphasised the high standard of Anglo-Saxon study in areas such as grammar, metrics and orthography, and the flowering of literature, not only in the vernacular, but also in hermeneutic-style Latin in the tenth and eleventh centuries.[2] This article argues that alterations evident in Ælfric’s Colloquy demonstrate adaptations made by readers of the text, to improve its efficacy in imparting knowledge of Latin, which was vital if monks and nuns were to follow the new reformed practices properly.

King Alfred famously described the situation in his kingdom as regards the state of learning as dire:

> Swæ clæne hio wæs oðfeallenu on Angelcynne ðæt swiðe feawe wæron behionan Humbre ðe hiora ðeninga cuðen understondan on Englisc oðde furðum an ærendgewrit of Lædene on Englisc areccean; ond ic wene ðætte noht monige begiondan Humbre næren.
>
> So fully had [learning] declined among the English that there were very few this side of the Humber who could understand the divine service in English or even translate a letter from Latin into English; and I think there were not many beyond the Humber either.[3]

Learning Latin was of paramount importance among churchmen, and a number of texts survive which testify to this. Ælfric’s Colloquy is one of several surviving educational texts

[1] Keith Allan, The Western Classical Tradition in Linguistics (London: Equinox, 2007). See Sarah Foot, Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England c.600-c.900 (Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press, 2006) for monastic life and education pre-900: ‘The extent to which any brother may have advanced beyond the basic study of Latin will have depended in part on the teaching available to him in his own minster, but also on his own abilities; many must have learnt little more than the rudiments, while others may have remained barely literate, able to participate in the liturgy by learning the Latin required through its constant repetition rather than by genuine understanding.’ (228).

[2] Patrizia Lendinara, ‘The World of Anglo-Saxon Learning’, in A Companion to Old English Literature, ed. by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge, pp. 264-81; Michael Lapidge, ‘The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature’, Anglo-Saxon England, 4 (1975), 67-111.

[3] Text taken from Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, A Guide to Old English, 5th edn (Oxford: Blackwell), pp 204-7. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

from the Anglo-Saxon period.[4] It is an early eleventh-century teaching text in the form of a Latin conversation, which pupils were expected to learn and recite as a way of memorising Latin grammar and vocabulary. Other Latin teaching texts from the period include not only scholastic colloquies such as this one by Ælfric, but also several grammars and glossaries, all of which give us an insight into the way Latin was taught in monastic schools in this period. It seems evident that the Anglo-Saxons on the whole found it difficult to learn Latin. This was problematic, since not only were Biblical texts and commentaries written in Latin, but also important ecclesiastical texts, which were the means of spreading the tenth-century Benedictine Reform. We can therefore see the development of teaching materials such as Ælfric's Colloquy as a response to this perceived lack of access to crucial Latin texts in the tenth and early eleventh centuries.

From a medieval viewpoint, a knowledge of Latin was essential for those in ecclesiastical orders. The primary motivation of monastic schools was to enable the performance of the Divine Office, for which a knowledge of Latin was vital. 'The concern of monasteries was not with Latin learning as an end in itself, but as a means of serving God.'[5] This concern, at its most basic level, was to ensure that the Latin of the Divine Office was correctly pronounced. As 'the emphasis of training was primarily phonological',[6] a pupil's earliest encounter with Latin would be in being taught its pronunciation through singing plainsong. Texts used in this way included the Psalter, which Reynolds notes was often accompanied by word-for-word interlinear glosses, where each Latin word was accompanied by an Old English translation above it. Such dependence on vernacular glossing, Reynolds argues, suggests that the Psalter was one of the first texts used in teaching children to read.[7] The fact that Ælfric's Colloquy also contains this kind of word-for-word gloss emphasises the text's use in learning Latin at a basic level, where Old English equivalents for the *Colloquy's* vocabulary were used to gain access to the Latin main text.

Being able to read and understand Latin correctly was also crucial in giving Anglo-Saxon readers access not only to the Bible, but also to a range of ancilliary material, such as biblical commentaries, saints' lives and liturgical texts. Most knowledge of Christianity had come to England originally through the medium of Latin, and had to be interpreted correctly. It was believed that not only the sense of the words, but also the order of the words of the Bible were part of the message of the Scriptures, and must therefore not be treated lightly or unwittingly mistranslated. Indeed, Ælfric, in his Preface to Genesis speaks of his misgivings about translating such sacred texts into the vernacular:

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[4] Although the Colloquy appears in four different manuscripts, this article is based on the version found in British Library MS. Cotton Tiberius A. III, which contains an Old English interlinear gloss (i.e. running translations of the Latin text in Old English, written just above each line of main text). All references are to *Ælfric's Colloquy*, ed. G. N. Garmonsway (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1939, revised edn. 1991).
[5] Lendinara, p. 270.
[6] Suzanne Reynolds, Medieval Reading: Grammar, Rhetoric and the Classical Text, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) p. 10.
[7] Reynolds, p. 9.

> Nu ys seo foresæde boc on manegum stowum swiðe nearolice gesett, and þeah swiðe deoplice on þam gastlicum andgite, and heo is swa geendebyrd swa swa God self hig gedihte þam writere Moise, and we ne durron na mare awritan on Englisc þonne þæt Læden hæfð, ne þa endebirdnisse awendan buton þam anum þæt þæt Læden and þæt Englisc nabbað na ane wisan on þære spræce fadunge.[8]
>
> Now the aforesaid book is in many places so densely written and so profound in its spiritual sense, and it is ordered as God himself directed the writer Moses, that we do not dare write more English than the Latin has, nor change the order, except for the one reason that Latin and English do not have one manner in the disposition of language.

One of the main difficulties faced by Anglo-Saxon learners of Latin was that, in contrast to speakers of Latin-based languages on the Continent, they had to learn it as a foreign language. Wright shows how these Continental 'Romance speakers' considered their spoken language to be Latin until the twelfth century, despite the increasing gap between the spoken language and what was written on the page: 'it may be reasonable for us to suggest that the teaching of spelling was done on an increasingly logographical basis – that is, word by word (as in modern Britain) rather than merely sound by sound'.[9] Continental learners of Latin were not only at an advantage in already speaking 'Latin', they also had access to a whole tradition of grammars and other language teaching aids written by classical authors which catered for their needs. By contrast, none of these texts had been written with a foreign-speaking audience in mind.

The problems of learning a foreign language were not new in the tenth century; since Saint Augustine's arrival in Kent and his part in the conversion of the English in the sixth century, access to the Scriptures through Latin had been necessary.

> Would-be authors of either nationality [Anglo Saxon or Irish] were confronted by the difficulties of writing in a foreign language. Without special study there was no question of these speakers of Celtic or Germanic dialects gaining direct access to the Scriptures, much less of their composing works of their own.[10]

Although grammars such as the Ars Minor by the Roman writer Donatus were known in Anglo-Saxon England, they did not provide the comprehensive details of Latin accidence which it was obviously felt were needed by Latin learners, and this led to teachers compiling their own grammars. Grammars by Anglo-Saxon churchmen such as Tatwine and Boniface focus more on the inflecting parts of speech, containing many lists and paradigms, and often focusing on Christian vocabulary. Ælfric, too, adapted his sources to cater better for the needs of his Latin pupils. His Grammar, which may have been used in conjunction with the Colloquy, is based on the classical work Excerptiones de Prisciano, but the text is not

[8] Text from Mitchell and Robinson, pp. 191-5.
[9] Roger Wright, A Sociophilological Study of Late Latin, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002) p. 9.
[10] Vivien Law, The Insular Latin Grammarians, (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1982) p. 9.

translated verbatim into Old English. The Excerptiones is itself an abridgement of Priscian's Institutiones Grammaticae, which was very popular in the late antique period, and it lacks the Greek words and passages and the longer Latin quotations found in Priscian's original. Ælfric makes further cuts, omitting digressions and some of the finer distinctions of the paradigm lists, adding instead his own quotations and paradigms, many with a local or monastic flavour.

The Grammar has been much studied for its Old English linguistic terminology, and while Law agrees that some of the linguistic terms used, such as nama (noun), word (word, single part of speech), dæl (part of speech), and stæf (letter) do appear to have had an independent, technical function, she argues that many of the longer loan-translations (e.g. foresetnys for praepositio) seem to have functioned as a gloss, or a way of translating the Latin into its Old English equivalent parts, rather than as a new independent term.[11] All these changes pitch the work at a lower level than the Latin original, somewhere between Donatus' Ars Maior and Priscian's Institutiones Grammaticae:

> In context of his oeuvre as a whole, Ælfric's decision to translate a Latin grammar into the vernacular is entirely consistent with his life's work: to provide a body of literature through which the monk or nun with only a scanty knowledge of Latin could none the less come to comprehend the Christian faith.[12]

This indicates that the Anglo-Saxons did indeed perceive that they had particular difficulties in learning Latin, and that Continental grammatical texts could not be used as effective teaching aids without some kind of adaptation. In composing his Grammar and Colloquy Ælfric went to some lengths to provide appropriate materials to allow his pupils to gain the knowledge of Latin that they needed.

Because the aims of medieval monastic education were different from those of classical schools (developing a true understanding of religious texts, as opposed to creating effective orators for public life), the focus of teaching in medieval schools was placed more on grammar than on rhetoric. In Anglo-Saxon England, grammar meant not only the skill required to understand a Latin text, but also to interpret Latin texts, especially the Bible. Whereas Roman teachers taught grammar as an ancilliary skill, something to aid the future orator, in medieval schools grammar became almost an end in itself: 'grammar in this sense [linguistic study] seems to have dominated the Anglo-Saxon curriculum, to the virtual exclusion of other disciplines'.[13] Indeed, we learn from biographies of Bishop Æþelwold by Wulfstan and Ælfric that as a young man he learnt grammar and metrics.[14] Even if

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[11] Vivien Law, Grammar and Grammarians in the Early Middle Ages, (Harlow: Longman, 1997) p. 214.
[12] Law, Grammar and Grammarians, p. 203.
[13] Lendinara, p. 277
[14] Ælfric, The Life of St Æthelwold, ed. and trans. by D. Whitelock, in English Historical Documents c.500-1042, 2nd edn, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979) pp. 831-9 (p. 833); Wulfstan of Winchester, The Life of St Æthelwold, ed. and trans. M. Lapidge and M. Winterbottom, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p. 15.

Æþelwold's education comprised more than these two strands of the trivium, the fact that these are the only two mentioned shows their importance in Anglo-Saxon learning.[15]

One way of making texts more accessible to those whose grasp of Latin was less than sound was to use glosses. These come in several forms and were used for different purposes: at their most basic, a text may be glossed in the reader's vernacular. Such texts are common in the Anglo-Saxon period, and were used as a way of building vocabulary and enabling the reader to understand the text. Some of these glosses, like the one which accompanies Ælfric's Colloquy, are so full that they translate almost every word. However, these glosses do not produce a translation; their style and syntax is dependent on the Latin text, and could not stand alone as a vernacular translation. Indeed, it is not their objective to make a new, independent text. Their aim is, rather, to 'transform the text into a source of Latin vocabulary'[16] and aid the learner in achieving their goal of being able to read the Latin independently.

Other forms of gloss include synonym glosses, where a difficult word is glossed by an explanation in Latin, or conversely, where a word is glossed to give further, more obscure alternatives, again in an attempt to increase the learner's vocabulary. Finally, some glosses show grammatical information – the gender of a noun or person of a verb for example, or the order in which the words should be read, to enable the reader to construe the text.[17]

Ælfric's Colloquy is accompanied in British Library, Cotton MS. Tiberius A.III by a near-continuous, interlinear gloss. The inclusion of this form of gloss, which appears to have been planned as part of the text, is puzzling, because we would expect pedagogical texts to be accompanied, if at all, either by more sporadic vernacular glossing, or by synonym or grammatical glosses. Comprehensive interlinear glossing such as that presented in the Colloquy more often accompanies texts which were expected to be read in private, perhaps by adults with limited Latin. Examples of texts with interlinear glosses include the Rule of St Benedict and the Regularis Concordia, which give the reader instruction on how to live a religious life. Both these texts, incidentally, appear in vernacular translations as well as in versions with comprehensive glossing, demonstrating that they were read by people who had trouble accessing the texts in their original Latin.

The Colloquy is an example of a teaching aid used frequently during this period as a way of building Latin vocabulary on a certain theme, in this case the occupations. The vocabulary, although varied, is of a fairly simple, everyday level: items include occupations such as

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[15] Contrast this with John of Salerno who says of Odo of Cluny: 'it was [at Tours] that he got his literary education. After that he studied dialectic and music under a very learned man, Remigius, at Paris.' (Vita Odonis: p. 6). Lendinara (1994) suggests that, although undoubtedly skilled in grammar and metrics, the Anglo-Saxons show little aptitude for, or interest in, the scientific subjects of the quadrivium: music, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy.

[16] Reynolds, p. 67.

[17] Several studies give details of different glossing techniques and their interpretation; see in particular, A. G. Rigg and G. R. Wieland, 'A Canterbury Classbook of the Mid-Eleventh Century (The 'Cambridge Songs' Manuscript)', Anglo-Saxon England, 4 (1975), pp. 113-30.

auceps, uenator, piscator, and arator (fowler, hunter, fisherman, ploughman); lists of animals and fish such as ceruus, ouis, ysycius, and ostrea (hart, sheep, salmon, oysters); and other everyday items such as those made by the leather-worker – subtalares, frenos et falera, calcaria et chamos (slippers, reins and trappings, spur straps and halters). We are clearly not dealing with a text intended to impart high-level technical or hermeneutic vocabulary.[18]

If we compare Ælfric's Colloquy with those written by his pupil, Ælfric Bata, we can see that he does not include the long vocabulary lists that are characteristic of Ælfric Bata's colloquies. A good example of this is towards the end of the Colloquy, when a pupil is asked what he drinks. He replies: 'ceruisam, si habeo, uel aquam si non habeo ceruisam' ('beer, if I have it, or water if I have no beer'; l. 299). In a version of the Colloquy revised by Ælfric Bata, the pupil replies: 'Cervisam vel medonem sive ydromellum, quod est mulsum, seu lac, si (non) habeo cervisam' ('beer or mead or hydromell, which is honey and water, or milk, if I don't have beer').[19]

Whether Ælfric Bata's longer lists make his colloquies more useful as an aid to teaching vocabulary is a moot point. Although he squeezes in more words to be learnt, they are often in catalogue-form, with little context to help the learner remember their meanings. The catalogue-form also means that they lose any illusion of imitating real-life speech, whereas the speeches in Ælfric's Colloquy demonstrate a greater regard for reality and brevity. However, if the purpose of these texts is to be memorised for the next day's lesson in order to learn vocabulary (rather than, say, to be acted out as a play),[20] then any perceived lack of realism is unlikely to matter in these texts.

Another technique used both by Ælfric and Ælfric Bata is to provide functional equivalents of phrases. However, whereas Ælfric varies his questioning throughout the Colloquy, supplying variants such as 'Quid habes operis?', 'Quomodo exerces opus tuum?', and 'Habes tu aliquem laborem?',[21] Ælfric Bata supplies equivalents in the same utterance: 'Quo vis ire modo? aut quid vis facere, aut quid facis?'.[22] This suggests that the text of Ælfric Bata's Colloquia is to be used by the teacher, perhaps supplying variants to be used in different lessons, or providing further questions to ask. These equivalents seem to be working in a similar way to synonym glosses, which in the case of the grammar Beatus quid est, found in Cambridge University Library MS. Gg.5.35, appear to provide information suitable for a teacher's questions to a pupil.[23] In contrast, the gloss accompanying Ælfric's Colloquy and the construction of its text do not seem to function in this way.

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[18] Hermeneutic Latin, as practised by writers such as Alcuin, contained obscure vocabulary, often either neologisms or Graecisms. See M. Lapidge, The Hermeneutic Style for further details.
[19] Translated by David Porter, 'The Latin Syllabus in Anglo-Saxon Monastic Schools', Neophilologus, 78 (1994), pp. 463-82 (p. 473).
[20] Porter, Latin Syllabus.
[21] 'What job do you have?', 'How do you do your work?', 'Have you any kind of work?'.
[22] 'Where do you want to go, or what do you want to do, or what are you doing?'Latin Colloquies from Pre-Conquest Britain, ed. Scott Gwara (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute for Medieval Studies, 1996), p. 56.
[23] Martha Bayless, 'Beatus Quid Est and the Study of Grammar in Late Anglo-Saxon England', Historiographia Linguistica, 20 (1993), pp. 67-110, (p. 75).

The grammar used in the Colloquy is fairly simple; it tends to keep to the present tense (even in places where it would be possible to use the past tense), does not use complex sentence structures such as subordinate clauses or indirect speech, and participles and subjunctives are rare. However, there are two places where the text abruptly changes to using the perfect tense. In the first one, twelve lines of past-tense dialogue seem to interrupt the hunter's conversation about what animals he catches and what he does with them. This subject development would seem to be a logical progression, and these twelve lines do not sit very well in the overall structure of the conversation:

-Fuisti hodie in uenatione?
-Non fui, quia dominicus dies est, sed heri fui in uenatione
-Quid cepisti?
-Duos ceruos et unum aprum
-Quomodo cepisti eos?
-Ceruos cepi in retibus et aprum iugulaui
-Quomodo fuisti ausus iugulare aprum?
-Canes perduxerunt eum ad me, et ego econtra stans subito iugulaui eum.
-Ualde audax fuisti tunc
-Non debet uenator formidolosus esse, quia uarie bestie morantur in siluis.
-Quid facis de tua uenatione? ... (ll. 67-80)

-Did you go hunting today?
-No I didn't, because it's Sunday today, but I did go hunting yesterday
-What did you catch?
-Two harts and a boar
-How did you catch them?
-The harts I caught in a net and the boar I stabbed
-How did you dare to stab the boar?
-The dogs chased him towards me, and I standing opposite stabbed him immediately
-You must have been brave to do that
-A hunter must not be timid, because all sorts of animals live in the woods
-What do you do with your catch? ...

The subject matter here is slightly at odds with the other speeches, which recount the workers' daily routines, rather than talking about specific events in the past. The possibility of this section being a later interpolation is suggested by the fact that the hunter's section is the longest in the whole of the Colloquy. Most speakers have eight or fewer exchanges with the teacher, yet the four with more than eight exchanges are significantly longer: the hunter has twenty-eight exchanges in total, the fisherman twenty-six, the fowler fourteen, and the pupil who is questioned about his day's work toward the end of the text, twenty-three.

This pupil's speech, like the hunter's, also includes several verbs in the past tense:

> Hac nocte, quando signum audiui, surrexi de lectulo et exiui ad ecclesiam, et cantaui nocturnam cum fratribus
>
> Last night, when I heard the bell, I got up out of bed and went to church, and sang nocturns with the brothers. (ll. 268-70)

Following this, the text turns to asking (in the present tense) what the pupil eats each day, where he sleeps and other details of his daily life, in a manner more in keeping with the previous speeches in the text.

We can compare this simpler style with that of one of Ælfric Bata's colloquies, found in Oxford, St John's College, MS. 154, whose purpose seems to be to drill the pupils in morphology:

> Nihil mali facio. Nihil feci, nihil habeo factum, nihil facere volo, quod malum sit, si Deus vult [...]
> Nihil mali facimus nec fecimus, nil habemus factum, nihil facere volumnus, quod nobis non oportet.
> 'I'm not doing anything wrong. I did nothing, I have done nothing, I want to do nothing that might be wrong, god willing. [...]
> We are doing nothing wrong, nor did we, nor have we done, nor do we wish to do anything we shouldn't.' [24]

Ælfric's Colloquy does not drill the students in morphology in this way. As we have seen, changes in tense and mood are rare, making the focus of the Colloquy the vocabulary rather than the grammatical structures involved. It is possible that Ælfric Bata's Colloquia are more complex because they are aimed at higher level students, which is perhaps borne out by the increased use of hermeneutic language found in his works. It is notable that Ælfric's Latin generally avoids hermeneutic vocabulary, and he seems to avoid it in the Colloquy too.

The two examples above indicate that the *Colloquy's* aim was to build vocabulary, rather than to drill on tenses of specific verbs or other aspects of grammar; if the latter had been the text's aim, we can assume that we would see a more varied usage of tenses throughout the Colloquy. As the subject matter of these two past-tense pieces differs subtly from that of the other speeches, it seems fair to suggest that what we are looking at here are interpolations into the original text. If they are indeed interpolations, then the most obvious reason for them is that either Ælfric or a later author added them to overcome some perceived deficiency of the original Colloquy, or to fit it for another purpose. The alterations seem to be quite clumsy, fitting with neither the subject nor the grammatical purpose of the surrounding text, which suggests that they were not done by Ælfric. It therefore appears that a later teacher has added more material to make parts of the Colloquy more grammatically challenging.

[24] Gwara, p. 56; translated Porter, pp. 474-5.

type of gloss is at odds with the aim of the insertions to make the text more complex

The Latin Colloquy itself, then, is a fairly straightforward text; its contents and form are in keeping with other pedagogical texts from the period. There are parts of the text which do not appear to belong to the original version, although without the exemplar we will never know for sure what form the original took. The *Colloquy's* gloss, however, is more problematic. While the more grammatically complex insertions into the Colloquy serve to make it a higer-level text, the gloss is of a type which would make for the easiest possible access to its text, and therefore these two aspects of the Colloquy as it is found in Cotton Tiberius A.III appear to be at odds with each other. An examination of the manuscript shows that the gloss was envisaged as an integral part of the text, as lines have been ruled on each folio to accommodate it, while the proposed interpolations are no different in appearance to the rest of the text. We have, then, two aspects of the *Colloquy's* text; one appears to restrict access by making it a harder text, suitable for more advanced learners, and the other (the gloss) seeks to provide easier access by providing a translation of nearly every word in the text. The conundrum is, why should both these features appear in the same planned text, and who was the gloss intended for?

It is unlikely that this version of the Colloquy was used as a school textbook; more recent research has shown that true examples of textbooks from this period are extremely rare.[25] As an expensive and labour-intensive item, a book would not have been routinely given to children, who would have been more likely to use wax tablets to practise writing. We have seen that the Colloquy is aimed at teaching at a fairly basic level (as evidenced by the vocabulary and sentence structure), and it is possible that the class was taken at least some of the time by an older student. This may account for the presence of such a detailed glossary, in a form which we would not usually expect in this particular kind of text. It seems most likely that the gloss was supplied as a crib for someone with either a shaky grasp of Latin, or who was not very confident in their abilities. To this end, a student-teacher could be a good candidate as the user of the gloss. If this is indeed the case, then the substantial gloss suggests that even a teacher at this time may not have been a confident reader of Latin.

The Colloquy shows the efforts that monks went to in adapting forms of educational texts and composing new ones, in order to give their pupils access to the Latin learning necessary for participation in their religious duties. That Ælfric and teachers like him took the time to create or modify the texts they taught from demonstrates the importance of their goal of educating their pupils to a reasonable standard in Latin. It also shows the ability and willingness of some teachers to ensure that materials were appropriate for teaching Latin as a foreign language, rather than being content to rely on texts by classical authors, which had their own shortcomings. While we may question the efficacy of some of these teaching materials, it is clear that they were adequate for at least some Anglo-Saxon pupils, who continued to write in both English and Latin, up to the Norman Conquest and beyond.

[25] See Rigg & Wieland; also Rosamond McKitterick, 'A Ninth-Century Schoolbook from the Loire Valley', Scriptorium, 30 (1976), pp. 225-31.