Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Medieval History

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmed20

The language of history-writing in the ninth century: an entangled approach

Máire Ní Mhaonaigh & Elizabeth M. Tyler

To cite this article: Máire Ní Mhaonaigh & Elizabeth M. Tyler (2021): The language of history-writing in the ninth century: an entangled approach, Journal of Medieval History, DOI: 10.1080/03044181.2021.1972692

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2021.1972692

Published online: 06 Sep 2021.

JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL HISTORY
https://doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2021.1972692

The language of history-writing in the ninth century: an entangled approach

Máire Ní Mhaonaigh[a] and Elizabeth M. Tyler[b]

[a]Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK; [b]Department of English and Centre for Medieval Studies, University of York, York, UK

ABSTRACT

This article explores the language in which history was written in ninth-century Britain and Ireland, focusing on accounts concerned with origins. It takes an entangled approach to the written vernacular and is concerned with how insular history-writing, whether in a vernacular language or Latin, was an integral part of a wider Latinate European story. Differences in language choice come more clearly into view, facilitating the exploration of the development of vernacular writing and the theory and practice of vernacularisation. The discussion is structured around three case studies, spanning Wales, Ireland and England. What emerges through comparative study is that linguistic theorisation and multilingual interactions both shaped language choice and were themes of the origin legends themselves, whether explicitly or implicitly. The need for vernacular languages, just like Latin, to have sustained institutional support in order to flourish is also underlined.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 29 March 2021
Accepted 16 August 2021

KEYWORDS
Entangledness; history-writing; vernacular; Latin; origin stories; *Historia Brittonum*; *Can a mbunadas na nGáedel*; Anglo-Saxon Chronicles

Introduction

This article focuses on language choice in the domain of history-writing in the ninth century. We engage primarily with origin legends, that is stories which recount how elites imagined the arrival of peoples in Britain and Ireland and which were often designed to further contemporary political ends.[1] This type of writing is often considered in studies concerning ethnic identity and group formation and thus presents an important site for exploring the complexity of the relationships between language and identity found across ninth-century Britain and Ireland.[2] In addressing this topic in this brief

CONTACT Máire Ní Mhaonaigh mnm21@cam.ac.uk St John's College, Cambridge CB2 1TP, UK

[1] The following abbreviation is used in this paper: *ASC*: David N. Dumville and Simon Keynes, eds., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles: A Collaborative Edition* (in progress, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983–): vol. 3: *MS A.*, ed. Janet Bately (Carmbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1986).

See Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'The Making of Nations in Britain and Ireland in the Early Middle Ages', in *Lordship and Learning: Studies in Memory of Trevor Aston*, ed. Ralph Evans (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2004), 11–37 (for which reference we are grateful to Ben Guy); Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Irish Origin-Legends and Genealogies: Recurrent Aetiologies', in *History and Heroic Tale: A Symposium*, eds. Tore Nyberg and others (Odense: Odense University Press, 1985), 51–96; Barbara Yorke, 'Anglo-Saxon Origin Legends', in *Myth, Rulership, Church and Charters: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Brooks*, eds. Julia Barrow and Andrew Wareham (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 15–30.

contribution, we aim to cast light on the specific insular situation and to contribute to the conceptual thinking in this special issue about the use of written vernaculars in the Latin West. To this end, we are also preoccupied with how insular history-writing, in its parts and as a whole, whether in Latin, Irish or English, was an integral part of a wider Latinate European story. Our methodology, in looking across insular texts and at their relationship with Carolingian histories, is informed by entangled history with its emphasis on trans-cultural complex interrelationships across and between societies, irrespective of what have become modern national boundaries. In taking an entangled approach, we seek to emphasise the dynamic, contingent, non-linear interactions such relationships entailed; we are concerned as much with disconnections as with connections, neither being visible in isolation.[3]

History-writing and language choice is a particularly productive space in which to take an entangled approach to the written vernacular. In Ireland and England the vernacular flourished in this domain, the situation in Wales is less clear-cut;[4] within the Carolingian realm, as elsewhere in Latin Europe, history-writing was not regarded as an area for vernacular experimentation. These varying linguistic situations emerge within a broadly comparable context in which the past, structured around accounts of migration and concerns for genealogy, etymology and chronology, was constructed to serve the needs of the present.[5] Against this backdrop, differences in language choice come more clearly into view, allowing us to probe a range of issues about the development of vernacular writing and the theory and practice of ninth-century vernacularisation.[6]

The textual foundation

Our exploration of these issues will be structured around three case studies spanning the ninth century in Wales, Ireland and England in turn. The texts in question are also

[2] In his study of Frankish identity, for example, Helmut Reimitz puts accounts of origins such as the Chronicle of Fredegar and *Liber historiae Francorum* to the fore: *History, Frankish Identity and the Framing of Western Ethnicity, 550–850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), especially Part II. See more generally, Walter Pohl, 'Introduction: Strategies of Identification, a Methodological Profile', in *Strategies of Identification: Ethnicity and Religion in Early Medieval Europe*, eds. Walter Pohl and Gerda Heydemann (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 1–64; and Ben Guy 'Origin Legends and Genealogies', in *Medieval Origin Legends*, eds. Lindy Brady and Patrick Wadden (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming 2021): we are grateful to Dr Guy for a pre-publication copy of this paper.

[3] See Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 37–61; and Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen, 'Introduction: Towards a Global Middles Ages', in *The Global Middle Ages*, eds. eaedem, *Past and Present* 238, Supplement 13 (2018): 2–3, 23–4.

[4] For regional overviews, see Helen Fulton, 'Britons and Saxons: The Earliest Writing in Welsh', in *The Cambridge History of Welsh Literature*, eds. Geraint Evans and Helen Fulton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 26–51; Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Literature of Medieval Ireland to *c.*800: From St Patrick to the Vikings', and Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'The Literature of Medieval Ireland, 800–1200: From the Vikings to the Normans', in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, eds. Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary. 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1: 9–31 and 32–71; and the contributions in Clare Lees, ed., *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[5] For the Latinate tradition, including detailed discussion of the *Historia Brittonum* and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, see Alheydis Plassmann, *Origo gentis: Identitäts- und Legitimitätsstiftung in früh- und hochmittelalterlichen Herkunftserzählungen* (Berlin: Akademie, 2006); and Magali Coumert, *Origines des peuples. Les récits du haut moyen âge occidental (550–850)* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2007). Coumert's emphasis on the shared literary connections between origin legends and on their innovations as a response to contemporary political concerns is fundamental to our article.

[6] Sheldon Pollock briefly sets out some of the underlying concepts of vernacularisation in 'The Cosmopolitan Vernacular', *Journal for Asian Studies* 57 (1998): 6–37 (7–10); see also his *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 19–30.

examples of three different genres of historical writing: narrative, poetry and annals. The earliest is a Latin narrative prose-history written in Gwynedd in Wales around the year 829/30, the *Historia Brittonum* ('History of the Britons'). It describes the origins of the Britons, as well as their relationship with neighbouring peoples between the fifth and seventh centuries. The earliest extant manuscript witness of what is generally considered the best version of the text was written *c.*1100.[7] Evidence for the text's circulation before this time includes a version associated with the mid tenth-century English king, Edmund I, and the translation of another version into Irish.[8]

The second text we examine is a vernacular Irish poem, *Can a mbunadas na nGáedel* ('Whence the Origins of the Irish?'). It was composed by an ecclesiastic from the north of Ireland, Máel Muru, about half a century after the *Historia Brittonum* had come into being. It provides a detailed account of the settlement of Ireland by the Irish in the pre-historic period, linking contemporary dynasties with specific individual settlers.[9] It informed Irish historical writing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries and its continued influence is attested by its preservation in a twelfth-century codex, the Book of Leinster, as well as in numerous later manuscripts.

The third of the texts under consideration was written more than a decade after Máel Muru composed his historical poem. The common stock of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles constitutes the annals from 60 BC up to the early 890s AD which appear in roughly the same form across the major versions of the Chronicles. Probably written at the court of the West Saxon king, Alfred the Great, who died in 899, the common stock presents origin legends for the various English kingdoms. Although it draws primarily on Latin texts, the common stock is written in English. The earliest surviving manuscript dates from the late ninth or early tenth century (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 173) and the latest manuscript shows the Chronicles being kept in the middle of the twelfth century (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud misc. 636). Versions were translated into Latin on a number of occasions, such as by Asser, Æthelweard and in version F produced at Canterbury, *c.*1100, used by the Anglo-Norman historians John of Worcester, William of Malmesbury and Henry of Huntington, and adapted by Geoffrey Gaimar, who produced the earliest surviving history-writing in French.[10]

[7] London, British Library, MS Harley 3589; see John Morris, ed. and trans., *Nennius, British History, and the Welsh Annals* (London: Phillimore, 1980).

[8] The Vatican Recension has been linked to the reign of Edmund; the earliest extant manuscript of the text, dating to the second half of the eleventh century, is of this recension: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 8768, and Rome, Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Reg. lat. 1964 (the manuscript was divided into two in modern times); see David N. Dumville, ed., *Historia Brittonum*, vol. 3: *The 'Vatican Recension'* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985), 24–8. An early eleventh-century copy of the Chartres recension was available to early editors of the *Historia Brittonum*, but it was destroyed during the Second World War; see David N. Dumville, 'An Irish Idiom Latinised', *Éigse*, 16, no. 6 (1975): 183–6; we are grateful to Ben Guy for advice on the manuscript transmission of the text. For the eleventh-century Irish version, see James Henthorn Todd, ed. and trans., *Leabhar Breathnach annso sís: The Irish Version of the Historia Brittonum of Nennius* (Dublin: Irish Archaeological Society, 1848), and for discussion, Thomas O. Clancy, 'Scotland, the "Nennian" Recension of the *Historia Brittonum*, and the *Lebor Bretnach*', in *Kings, Clerics and Chronicles in Scotland, 500–1297: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson on the Occasion of Her Ninetieth Birthday*, ed. Simon Taylor (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 87–107.

[9] Todd, ed., *Leabhar Breathnach*, 220–71; for discussion, see Katja Ritari, '*Can a mbunadas na nGáedel*: Remembering the Past in Irish Pseudohistorical Poems', *Peritia* 28 (2017): 155–76 (160–5).

[10] For editions of the versions of the Chronicles, see David N. Dumville and Simon Keynes, eds., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles: A Collaborative Edition* (in progress, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983–). The best translation remains Dorothy Whitelock, David C. Douglas and Susie I. Tucker, eds. and trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Revised Translation* (London: Eyre and Spottiswode, 1961). For discussion, see Simon Keynes, 'Manuscripts of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, vol. 1: *c.400–1100*, ed. Richard Gameson

The three selected texts, *Historia Brittonum*, *Can a mbunadas na nGáedel* and the common stock of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, are synchronising histories in which insular events are aligned with Roman imperial, as well as Christian, happenings. They draw on a shared inheritance of written Latin history in various ways. The Bible provides a foundational framework for all three textual witnesses and they have recourse to other fundamental sources. These include Isidore of Seville's *Chronica maiora* and his *Etymologiae*, Eusebius of Caesarea's *Historia ecclesiastica* (in Rufinus' translations), Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica*, the *Liber pontificalis* and the Frankish Table of Nations. Other works, which shape the vision of history pursued in the three texts are Orosius' *Historiae* and Virgil's *Aeneid*.[11] In both concept and source material, the three insular accounts were connected with the Carolingian world of history-writing which, frequently circulating in substantial compilations, was itself becoming more prolific and complex during the ninth century.[12] Their authors all had access to local traditions, written (in Latin and vernacular) and spoken and, as we will see, some of these were shared across the insular world.

The contextual frame

The political and linguistic contexts of the texts are varied, each being particular to its own space and time. Nonetheless, common developments inform all three. Consolidation of smaller kingdoms into larger more dominant entities was a feature of political life throughout the insular region in the period. But while there were concepts of Ireland, England and Wales, none was yet a single kingdom and ethnic identities did not map onto realised political power. The idea of a Christian identity also formed an important basis in evolving definitions of distinct peoples. Viking involvement was often a significant factor in power struggles between various kingdoms, Scandinavians serving as a relational strand. In the ninth century, religion had a specific resonance, differentiating pagan vikings and creating categories of 'us' and 'them'. At the same time, Scandinavian settlement also contributed to the political consolidation into larger kingdoms.[13]

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 537–52; and Pauline Stafford, *After Alfred: Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and Chroniclers, 900–1150* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), including for referring to Chronicles, plural, rather than singular (1–2).

[11] The three texts each draw on a selection of these sources, supplementing them with others; see Janet Bately, 'World History in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*: Its Sources and its Separateness from the Old English Orosius', *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979): 177–94; Michael Clarke, 'The *Leabhar Gabhála* and Carolingian Origin Legends', in *Early Medieval Ireland and Europe: Chronology, Contacts, Scholarship*, eds. Pádraic Moran and Immo Warntjes (Turnout: Brepols, 2015), 441–79; and David N. Dumville, '*Historia Brittonum*: An Insular History from the Carolingian Age', in *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter*, eds. Anton Scharer and Georg Scheibelreiter (Vienna: Oldenbourg, 1994), 406–34.

[12] See, for example, Helmut Reimitz, 'Ein karolingisches Geschichtsbuch aus Saint-Amand: der *Codex Vindobonensis palat*. 473', in *Text – Schrift – Codex: Quellenkundliche Arbeiten aus dem Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, eds. Christoph Egger and Herwig Weigl (Vienna: Oldenbourg, 2000), 34–90; and Anton Scharer, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Continental Annal-Writing', in *Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Language, Literature History*, ed. Alice Jorgensen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 161–6. The general context is set out in Rosamond McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), especially 13–22 and 28–59.

[13] For detail underpinning these general statements, see Simon Keynes, 'England, 700–900', in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 2: *c.700–c.900*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 18–42; and Thomas Charles-Edwards 'Language and Society among the Insular Celts, AD 400–1000', in *The Celtic World*, ed. Miranda Green (London: Routledge, 1995), 703–36.

Language formed a further distinguishing feature; our texts are written for three peoples whose vernaculars are mutually unintelligible but who share close cultural connections. None of these languages was Latin (in however rustic a form), in contrast with the Carolingian realm which includes Latin and Romance, alongside various Germanic languages or dialects which are not so different from each other. But Latin, the universal language of the Western Church, functioned throughout Britain and Ireland as a means of communication between learned elites. Writing in Latin was a dominant feature of intellectual life; vernacular writing is in evidence to varying degrees across the insular world. From the beginning of the seventh century, both English and Irish were written in the Latin alphabet with legal material being prominent in both. Written Welsh is attested later and less abundantly; ninth-century marginal comments pertaining to property disputes are among the earliest vernacular material to survive. Early examples of English, Irish and Welsh occur most frequently as glosses and marginalia in Latin manuscripts, highlighting the integral connection and interdependency between writing in Latin and vernaculars.[14] It should be emphasised that choice of language was not understood in binary terms, as the late ninth- or early tenth-century Old English translation of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* makes clear. The Old English, following Bede's Latin, claims that King Æthelbert ordered that his law code, set down in writing according to the Roman manner (*æfter Romana bysene*), be written in English (*Englisc*).[15] Similarly, early Irish texts written in a mixed form of Latin and Irish suggest that interplay between Latin and vernacular was in some contexts a linguistic norm.[16]

As Latin and vernaculars were entangled, so too did specific vernaculars connect with one another in this Latinate, learned milieu.[17] The career of Aldhelm of Malmesbury (d. 709), whose foundation of Malmesbury in Wessex may have been Irish, presents a well-studied and rich example. Aldhelm, whose Latin poetry may reveal a debt to Old English poetics, was closely associated with the Northumbrian king, Aldfrith.[18] The latter was also known by an Irish name, Flann Fína, which he may have acquired while being educated among the Irish with whom he had dynastic affiliations.[19] Adomnán of Iona, as well as Theodore and Hadrian of Canterbury, were involved in

[14] There is an excellent account of the earliest insular writing, drawing attention to connections and parallels between the various regions, by Julia M.H. Smith, 'Writing in Britain and Ireland, *c*.400–800', in *Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. Lees, 19–49.

[15] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, eds. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 150–1 (II.5), and Thomas Miller, ed., and trans., *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. 2 parts in 4 vols. Early English Text Society, Original Series 95, 96, 110, 111 (London: N Trübner and Co., 1890–8), 110–11 (II.5). Ingrid Ivarsen, 'A Vernacular Genre? Latin and the Early English Laws', in this special issue, Alban Gautier and Helen Gittos eds., *Vernacular Languages in the Long Ninth Century*, published as *Journal of Medieval History* 47, nos. 4–5 (2021), argues that the law code in question was written originally in Latin.

[16] Jacopo Bisagni, 'Prolegomena to the Study of Code-Switching in the Old Irish Glosses', *Peritia*, 24–5 (2013–14): 1–58, and Michael Clarke, 'Merger and Contrast between Latin and Medieval Irish', in *Code-Switching in Medieval Ireland and England: Proceedings of a Workshop on Code-Switching in the Medieval Classroom, Utrecht 29th May 2015*, ed. Mícheál Ó Flaithearta, assisted by Lars B. Nooij (Bremen: Hempen, 2018), 1–31.

[17] See the comprehensive discussion of the use of the vernacular in Britain, Ireland and Germanic-speaking areas in Immo Warntjes, 'Die Verwendung der Volkssprache in frühmittelalterlichen Klosterschulen', in *Wissenspaläste: Räume des Wissens in der Vormoderne*, eds. Gesine Mierke and Christoph Fasbender. EYPOΠ/EUROS 2, Chemnitzer Arbeiten zur Literaturwissenschaft (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neuman, 2013), 153–83.

[18] On Aldhelm and Old English, see Chris Abram, 'Aldhelm and the Two Cultures of Anglo-Saxon Poetry', *Literature Compass* 4, no. 5 (2007): 1354–77. The relationship between the two may have been that of godfather (Aldhelm) and godson (Aldfrith): see Michael Herren and Michael Lapidge, eds., *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1979), 32; and Barbara Yorke, *Rex doctissimus: Bede and King Alfred of Northumbria*. Jarrow Lecture 2009 (Jarrow: St Paul's Church, 2009), 9.

his education and he corresponded with British, Irish and Anglo-Saxon leaders and scholars down to his death at the end of the first decade of the eighth century.[20] Thus, his intellectual environment was one in which he could have encountered Irish and English in spoken and written form. Opportunities for exchange between Irish and Welsh were also available in scholarly and other contexts, though the evidence for these is later. They are exemplified in the occurrence of Welsh words in *Sanas Cormaic*, a ninth-century vernacular Irish glossary; and by the presence of Irish scribes in Welsh scriptoria around the same time.[21]

Although Irish, Welsh and English were written to varying degrees earlier, as the above discussion shows, the ninth century saw a perceptible shift in their use in writing. It is in that century that written Welsh comes clearly into view.[22] In the case of Old English, this expansion has been linked to the programme of educational reform of the West Saxon king, Alfred, and the royal backing it accorded vernacular writing.[23] Writing in Irish acquired early ecclesiastical endorsement and the language was fostered as being of similar status to Latin.[24] This productive environment was conducive to vernacular writing on various themes and in different forms. Nonetheless, writing in Irish also became more established in this century.[25]

[19] The name reflects that of a postulated Irish mother, Fín, but the genealogical evidence as to the identity of his mother is not conclusive; he appears to be connected to the northern Irish dynasty of Cenél nÉogain: see Colin Ireland, 'Aldfrith of Northumbria and the Irish Genealogies', *Celtica* 22 (1991): 64–78.

[20] Michael Lapidge, 'The Career of Aldhelm', *Anglo-Saxon England* 36 (2007): 15–69; see also Smith, 'Writing in Britain and Ireland', 45; and Barbara Yorke, 'Aldhelm's Irish and British Connections', in *Aldhelm and Sherborne: Essays to Celebrate the Founding of the Bishopric*, eds. Katherine Barker and Nicholas Brooks (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2010), 164–80.

[21] Kuno Meyer, ed. and trans., '*Sanas Cormaic*: An Old-Irish Glossary Compiled by Cormac úa Cuilennáin, King-Bishop of Cashel in the Tenth Century', in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, vol. 4, eds. Osborn Bergin and others (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1912); see Paul Russell, 'Brittonic Words in Irish Glossaries', in *Hispano-Gallo-Brittonica: Essays in Honour of Professor D. Ellis Evans on the Occasion of his Sixty-fifth Birthday*, eds. Joseph F. Eska, R. Geraint Gruffydd and Nicholas Jacob (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), 166–82. The activities of two named Irish scribes, Nuadu and Dubthach, are best documented, in the form of the Juvencus manuscript (Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.4.42) and the Bamberg Cryptogram: see Helen McKee, ed., *The Cambridge Juvencus Manuscript Glossed in Latin, Old Welsh and Old Irish: Text and Commentary* (Aberystwyth: Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies Publications, 2000), 9–12; René Derolez, 'Dubthach's Cryptogram: Some Notes in Connexion with Brussels MS 9565–66', *L'Antiquité Classique* 21 (1952): 359–75; and Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 32–3.

[22] The Tywyn stone preserving an inscription in Old Welsh was once thought to be seventh- or eighth-century in date, but the current consensus places it in the ninth: Nancy Edwards, *A Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture*, vol. 3: *North Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 430. The date of the earliest Welsh verse is contested; heroic poetry attributed to Aneirin and Taliesin is situated in the seventh century and it has been argued that written versions could go back to that period; for a summary of the evidence, see Fulton, 'Britons and Saxons', 29–36.

[23] Susan Irvine, 'English Literature in the Ninth Century', in *Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. Lees, 209–31

[24] This is expressed most clearly in the early eighth-century grammatical treatise *Auraicept na nÉces*; for discussion, see Pádraic Moran, 'Irish Vernacular Stories: Language, Literacy, Literature', in *Anfangsgeschichten, Origin Stories: der Beginn volkssprachiger Schriftlichkeit in komparatistischer Perspektive, the Rise of Vernacular Literature in a Comparative Perspective*, eds. Norbert Kössinger and others. Mittelalterstudien des Instituts zur interdisziplinären Erforschung des Mittelalters und seines Nachwirkens, Paderborn, 31 (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2018), 259–73 (266–70). The core of this important text was edited by Anders Ahlqvist who dated it to the early eighth century: *The Early Irish Linguist: An Edition of the Canonical Part of Auraicept na nÉces* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1983); Nicolai Egjar Engesland, 'The Intellectual Background of the Earliest Irish Grammar', in this special issue, Gautier and Gittos eds., *Vernacular Languages in the Long Ninth Century*, argues that it is ninth-century in date.

[25] Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Literature of Medieval Ireland, 800–1200', 40–1.

Theoretical considerations

These varying trajectories of English, Irish and Welsh as written languages and the different development of other vernaculars in the Latin West serve to remind us that the cultivation of a vernacular language as an extensive written medium remains noteworthy rather than the norm. In societies in which the use of the written word was limited, as was the case in the early Middle Ages, vernacularisation, with all the attendant orthographic and grammatical engagement it entailed, required investment and institutional support. To write in a vernacular was not necessarily easier than writing in Latin, as the faltering style and absence of syntactic control, which are characteristic of the annal for 755 in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles (an unusually extended narrative) makes clear. Although it records events of the mid eighth century, it was probably written in Alfred's reign.[26] The more typical situation linguistically is Latin and vernacular in creative interaction with one another on a manuscript page, as is found in the earliest Irish annalistic writing.[27] Steady, flowing progress in advancement of the written vernacular is not the rule; rather it is experimental, sporadic and usually entangled with Latin, as we have seen. The vernacular gains momentum when promoted and instrumentalised.

The promotion of the vernacular happened in specific contexts; in the ninth century, although it was expanding, writing – whether vernacular or Latin – remained an exclusive and limited phenomenon.[28] It is worth underscoring, as well, that the expansion of vernacular writing happened in the context of the expansion of Latin writing; that is writing in general was expanding. The Carolingian model in which Latin writing was dominant should not be assumed to reflect a norm in which Latin was central and vernaculars later and peripheral. This specific situation pertains to the Carolingian realms for particular historical and linguistic reasons and needs to be understood in those terms rather than as a regular state of affairs.[29] Considering the very different situation in the Greek-speaking world is instructive in this regard. In the eastern Mediterranean and contiguous areas where multiple written languages had flourished for a considerable period, Greek does not dominate the written sphere in the same way as Latin does in the West.[30] It is not an accident, for example, that Wulfila's Gospels are a translation into Gothic from Greek.[31]

[26] Janet Bately, 'The Compilation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 60 BC to AD 890: Vocabulary as Evidence', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 64 (1980 for 1978): 93–129 (111–13 and 115).
[27] David N. Dumville, 'Latin and Irish in the Annals of Ulster', in *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes*, eds. Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamond McKitterick and David N. Dumville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 320–41.
[28] See Eltjo Buringh, *Medieval Manuscript Production in the Latin West: Explorations with a Global Database* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 328–48.
[29] On the socially transformative but still fundamentally elite nature of literacy in the early Middle Ages, see Julia M.H. Smith, *Europe after Rome: A New Cultural History, 500–1000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 40–50, and further reading suggested, especially 317–18. Robin Fleming's turn to material culture to write the history of early medieval Britain is a response not only to the limited survival of texts but also the limited use of texts: *Britain after Rome: The Fall and Rise, 400–1070* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), especially xix–xxii.
[30] Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, 'Greek', 9–25; John W. Watt, 'Syriac', 47–60; David Brakke, 'Coptic', 61–74; Robin Darling Young, 'Armenian', 75–85; and Stephen H. Rapp Jr., 'Georgian', 87–102, all in *A Companion to Late Antique Literature*, eds. Scott McGill and Edward J. Watts (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018).
[31] Wilhelm Streitberg, ed., *Die gotische Bibel*, vol 1: *Der gotische Text und seine griechische Vorlage*. 7th edn., with supplement by Piergiuseppe Scardigli (Heidelberg: Winter 2000). See, for discussion, Carla Falluomini, *The Gothic Version of the Gospels and Pauline Epistles: Cultural Background, Transmission and Character*. Arbeiten zur Neutestamentlichen Textforschung 46 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 4–24; she also addresses the contested question of whether Wulfila had supplementary access to a Latin version of the Bible.

From this broader comparative perspective, the relatively extensive writing of the vernacular in Ireland and England is not eccentric with reference to a Carolingian situation.

Thus, both Latinity in Carolingian realms and insular vernacularity need to be accounted for – neither is a norm from which there is divergence. It is never obvious that vernacularity will flourish, nor that Latinity would remain so dominant on the Continent. In looking at the writing of the three insular languages, English, Irish and Welsh, we seek to draw attention to a nuanced picture of difference from continental Latin Europe, but not isolation. The central role of Irish and English clerics in Frankish intellectual circles exemplifies crucial connections, as do specific dynastic and marital ties.[32] Continental historical writing is influential in insular contexts, as we will see. There is significant variation, but differences are explicable in terms of specific local circumstances and marked by an awareness of what was going on elsewhere across the islands of Britain and Ireland and on the Continent. This is a story of attention to entanglement which can also reveal what was actually different from place to place, from language to language, from specific situation to specific situation. It is determined by the decisions secular and ecclesiastical leaders made and how language was instrumentalised by the agendas they pursued, rather than by a natural rise of the vernacular. Those agendas are especially manifest in stories about origins and it is to our three specific case studies we now turn.

The textual foundation: three specific texts

A Latin-British narrative history

The earliest of the three texts which inform our discussion of the language of history-writing in Britain and Ireland in the ninth century is the *Historia Brittonum* ('The History of the Britons').[33] A rich, complex narrative, notwithstanding its relative brevity, it combines varied accounts of British origins, with information concerning neighbouring peoples, specifically Saxons, Irish and Picts. These strands are augmented by saintly deeds, as well as supernatural marvels.[34] The structural framework of this material involves chronology, genealogy and migration; the language in which it is written is Latin.

Latin writing is dominant among the sparse records relating to Wales down to the ninth century, as already noted. Nonetheless, a few diverse vernacular compositions have survived, including computistics, property records, as well as poetry, indicating that Welsh was an appropriate medium in which to document subject matter ranging from administration to religion.[35] Early epigraphic evidence includes bilingual inscriptions in Latin and Irish, the latter written in ogam.[36] The written culture of Wales was

[32] See Rosamond McKitterick, 'England and the Continent', in *New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 2, ed. McKitterick, 64–84; and Sven Meeder, 'Irish Perigrinatio and Cultural Exchange', in *Le migrazioni nell'alto medioevo*. Settimane di Studio del CISAM 66 (Spoleto: CISAM, 2019), 427–51.

[33] Its association with Nennius in a prologue to the text has been dated to the mid eleventh century: David N. Dumville: '"Nennius" and the *Historia Brittonum*', *Studia Celtica* 10–11 (1975–6): 78–95, reprinted in his *Histories and Pseudo-Histories of the Insular Middle Ages* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1990). Ben Guy has put forward cogent arguments to suggest that he was in fact the ninth-century author: 'The Origins of the Compilation of Welsh Historical Texts in Harley 3859', *Studia Celtica* 49 (2015): 21–56 (45–54).

[34] This is, of course, an oversimplification; for a summary of the subject matter of the narrative, see Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons, 350–1064* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 439–40.

[35] References to the texts in question are provided in Fulton, 'Britons and Saxons'.

[36] Damian McManus, *A Guide to Ogam* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1991), 61–4.

multilingual from the start. This reflected the spoken reality; British and Irish were used alongside Latin which remained a language of communication among the elite until well into the seventh century.[37] Contact with English also became increasingly significant. Roughly contemporary with the *Historia Brittonum* is the alphabet of Nemniuus which is preserved in a ninth-century manuscript.[38] Based on a runic futhark common in England, the names of the letters are given in Welsh. Moreover, it is claimed that this hybrid creation came into being in the context of a dispute between two scholars, one English, the other Welsh.[39] This fictional story encapsulates the linguistic diversity of Welsh learning of the time.

The nature of this literary landscape afforded the author of the *Historia Brittonum* linguistic options. In selecting Latin as the language in which to pen his history, he made a conscious language choice. He had a competent mastery of it and produced a short, well-crafted text. His own native language was undoubtedly Welsh, as indicated by the scattered references to what he terms *nostra lingua* ('our language'), with reference to British place-names provided as the equivalent of Old English ones.[40] In a recent analysis of such place-names as part of a larger study of the author's use of the vernacular, Rebecca Thomas has highlighted the occasional use of Welsh prepositions with these alternative names as an indicator of his natural fluency in the language he himself termed British.[41] Many of the name-forms will have been derived directly from the author's copious sources, as Thomas notes,[42] and in including alternatives, he is augmenting the material upon which he drew. Two very different versions of the origins of the Britons form part of his narrative and the history of the fifth-century Briton, Cunedda, is presented in various ways.[43] The author wishes to be comprehensive and one aspect of this might be the provision of parallel names in different languages.[44] That this has specific significance in terms of the author's own attitude to language is not necessarily the case.

One passage in the *Historia Brittonum* may have greater significance, as far as language use is concerned. At a feast hosted by Hengist, the Saxon leader, Vortigern the Briton, and his followers, including his interpreter Ceretic, got very drunk. Desiring the beautiful server, Hengist's daughter, Vortigern 'through his interpreter' (*per interpretem suum*), asked her father for her hand in marriage.[45] The marriage was permitted, in return for the Saxons' acquisition of Kent, 'regionem quae in lingua eorum vocatur Canturguoralen, in nostra autem Chent' ('a region that in their language is called

[37] Charles-Edwards sets out the linguistic situation in the early period clearly and comprehensively: *Wales and the Britons*, 94–112 (spoken Latin), 112–14 (spoken Irish); on Latin, see also Peter Schrijver, 'The Rise and Fall of British Latin: Evidence from English and Brittonic', in *The Celtic Roots of English*, eds. Filppula Markku, Juhani Klemola and Heli Pitkänen. Studies in Languages 37 (Joensuu: University of Joensuu, 2002), 87–110.
[38] The *Liber Commonei*, part of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F 4.32 (St Dunstan's Classbook). Nemniuus has been identified with Nennius who is associated with the *Historia Brittonum*: see Guy, 'Origins'.
[39] See Guy, 'Origins', 50–2.
[40] See, for example, Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 31 and 72 (§ 44).
[41] Thomas' examination of the use of the vernacular in the *Historia Brittonum* forms part of her thesis, 'Perceptions of Peoples in Early Medieval Wales' (Ph.D. diss, University of Cambridge, 2019), 84–97; on the use of Welsh prepositions, see 86–7 and 90. Her research will be published as a volume in Boydell and Brewer's Studies in Celtic History series, *Reinventing the Britons: History and Identity in Early Medieval Wales* (forthcoming, 2022).
[42] Thomas, 'Perceptions of Peoples', 85–6.
[43] Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 21, 37, 62 and 79 (§§ 14 and 62).
[44] In the Prologue, the reader is asked 'to pardon me for daring to write so much here': Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 9 and 50.
[45] Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 28 and 69 (§ 37).

Canturguoralen, in ours Kent').[46] The episode constitutes a pivotal passage in a stereotypical origin myth; nonetheless it may reflect something of the reality of multilingual communication.[47] The normality of conversations across languages in elite circles in medieval Britain meant that facilitators like Ceretic remain invisible for the most part.

The occurrence of occasional Welsh words throughout the Latin text may, at first glance, provide a glimpse of the type of code-switching which was a regular part of medieval learned discourse. Most of the words in question are names, however,[48] and the few common nouns used, often denoting battles, frequently occur in phrases which function as labels, such as *gueith Lin Garan* ('the battle of Llyn Garan').[49] These battles were most likely known by such titles; in the same way, the Welsh epithets accorded a number of kings could have been drawn from existing nomenclature. They include four Northumbrian kings whose alleged qualities are encapsulated by means of a nominal or adjectival Welsh form.[50] This variegated linguistic tapestry is indicative of the cultural and political context in which the author of the *Historia Brittonum* functioned, but these Welsh words scarcely provide an insight into his linguistic world-view.

This is not least since such Welsh words may have been present already in the author's sources. The plethora of Welsh terms occurring in the section of the text known as the 'Northern History' has previously been noted, and taken as suggestive of underlying vernacular material.[51] The author's account of Hengist and Horsa has been linked to a Kentish origin legend, and an English framework has been postulated for the Vortigern story.[52] The strand depicting interaction between this pagan ruler and St Germanus might be indebted to Patrician hagiography.[53] The author's account of *mirabilia Hiberniae* could have come from a similar milieu.[54] Diverse details concerning the origins of the Irish could have been furnished by Irish texts, in Latin or the vernacular; indeed the wisest of the Irish are referred to as having supplied information on one occasion.[55] But the biblical origin of the Irish is discussed in scholarly comments in ninth-century continental manuscripts, as we shall see, and so could have reached the author via the same channels as the Frankish Table of Nations, upon which he drew for one of two contrasting explanations of British origins.[56] The author's debt to Gildas and Bede is also well-known.[57]

[46] Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 28 and 69 (§ 37).
[47] Hengist is made to speak English in a later feast-scene, ordering his men in Old English to draw their daggers (*Eu, nimet saxas*): Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 32 and 73 (§ 46).
[48] The Welsh words in the text are discussed by Thomas, 'Perceptions of Peoples', 84–93.
[49] Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 36 and 77 (§ 57).
[50] Thomas, 'Perceptions of Peoples', 88–9.
[51] Kenneth Jackson, 'On the Northern British Section in Nennius', in *Celt and Saxon: Studies in the Early British Border*, ed. Nora K. Chadwick. Revd. edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 20–62; see also Thomas, 'Perceptions of Peoples', 88.
[52] Nicholas P. Brooks, 'The English Origin Myth', in idem, *Anglo-Saxon Myths: State and Church* (London: Hambledon Press, 2000), 79–89 (82–6); and David N. Dumville, 'The Historical Value of the *Historia Brittonum*', *Arthurian Literature* 6 (1986): 1–26 (12), reprinted in his *Histories and Pseudo-Histories*.
[53] Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 443–4.
[54] Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 43 and 83–4 (§ 75).
[55] Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 20, 21, 61 and 62 (§§ 13 and 15); the specific reference to *peritissimi Scottorum* is § 15.
[56] These are listed as 'the Annals of the Romans' (*de annalibus Romanorum*), 'the Chronicles of the Holy Fathers' (*de cronicis sanctorum patrum*) and 'the writings of the Irish and the English' (*de scriptis Scottorum Saxonumque*): Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 9 and 50 (Preface).
[57] For a detailed discussion of the text and its sources, see Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 437–52.

Texts in Latin and various vernaculars informed his learned enterprise and underline a deliberate preference made on the part of the creator of the *Historia Brittonum* in producing a Latin composition. In putting together his history from various sources, his language of expression was a meaningful choice. He wrote in the early years of the rule of Merfyn Frych who was to establish a new ruling line, the so-called Second Dynasty of Gwynedd. As he established his power, Merfyn may have sought to have his authority bolstered, with recourse to written documents. The story of Cunedda, fifth-century ruler of Gwynedd, has a prominent position in *Historia Brittonum*.[58] The text's focus on relations between Britons and English in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries would have resonated in the ninth, particularly in the context of the likely involvement of Mercia in the political struggle that eventually brought Merfyn to power.[59] A Latin account would ensure access to this particular version of history, on the part of non-British speakers whose own affairs were entwined with that of Gwynedd. These included Irish speakers on the Isle of Man where Merfyn's role is likely to have remained significant after his assumption of power.[60] It may be noted that a Powys-inspired history on the Pillar of Eliseg roughly contemporary with the *Historia Brittonum* is also in Latin.[61]

While Gwynedd is central to the *Historia Brittonum*, the narrative is conceived as a history of interconnected dynasties, rather than an authoritative version of the origins of a specific subgroup. Thus, the use of Latin is unlikely to have been driven solely by the concerns of any such group. Relations between peoples are paramount, much more so than the overall ambition of a given king or kings. Intricate layers of affiliation and opposition in turn constitute the text's dominant core. This is a history of the Britons, but also of the English, the Irish and the Picts as well. Their levels of engagement with one another structure the narrative and give it meaning as well as form. It is situational history, an account of the Britons in relation to those whose space and time they shared. Expressed by means of a common, learned language, the use of Latin could highlight connections, while also ensuring that a British version of history might have circulated and been heard. Choice of language had a functional dimension; the perspective of the Britons was comprehendingly articulated as part of an entangled web.

At a functional level, Latin was also the language of Rome. Unlike Bede, whose history of interconnected peoples underlined their shared language as the language of Scriptures and the Church, the author of the *Historia Brittonum* looked to Latin as a pivotal part of the Britons' cultural inheritance. Direct descendants of the Romans, the Britons are presented as being in a direct line from Aeneas, the Trojan founder of Rome, via his grandson Britto.[62] In recalling the Roman empire, however, the author's mind was also focused on another realm linked with Rome, but closer in time to his own – the Franks. For this reason, he also situated the British within an early medieval world dominated by his Frankish neighbours, by referring to the legend of the foundation of Europe by

[58] See especially Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 37 and 79 (§ 62).
[59] Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 475–8.
[60] The nature of Merfyn's association with Man is explored in Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 467–79.
[61] Victory over the English on the part of Eliseg to whom the pillar was erected by his grandson in 854 is celebrated on the inscription: Nancy Edwards, 'Rethinking the Pillar of Eliseg', *Antiquaries Journal* 89 (2009): 143–77 (161–2); Charles-Edwards compares the version of history recounted on the Pillar with that of the *Historia Brittonum*: *Wales and the Britons*, 447–52.
[62] Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 19, 20, 60 and 61 (§§ 10–11).

Alanus, whose grandsons were Francus, Romanus, Britto and Albanus.[63] His source for this was the Frankish Table of Nations, which circulated widely in the Carolingian realm.[64] Like the Franks, the British were accorded Trojan origins and this accorded them a special status. Thus, the *Historia Brittonum* is in the same tradition as the seventh-century Chronicle of Fredegar and the eighth-century *Liber historiae Francorum*, texts which circulated as part of Carolingian historical compilations.[65] Part of the reason, then, for its Latinity is its strong sense of the British, like the Franks, as a 'Roman' people.

In aligning the Britons with Rome, the author accorded them a place in a scheme of world history. In so doing, he made use of a familiar framework by means of which his history was linked chronologically and spatially to a wider biblically-inspired whole. He signals this intention clearly by commencing his account with the Six Ages of the World.[66] His chronology is anchored further with reference to a series of Roman emperors from Julius Caesar to Magnus Maximus, who ruled towards the end of the fourth century.[67] His approach to writing history was synchronistic; his recourse to a common model of history-writing might suggest that his choice of Latin was associated with this. However, the rich seam of synchronising history from early medieval Ireland was in the vernacular, as our examination of a later ninth-century poem by an Irish ecclesiastic, Máel Muru Othna, will show.

A vernacular Irish poem on origins

Can a mbunadas na nGáedel ('Whence the origins of the Irish?') is a vernacular poem varying between about 85 and 91 stanzas in length in the 12 manuscript copies in which it is preserved, many of which ascribe it to Máel Muru Othna. His epithet 'Othna' (of Othain) links the poet with the monastery of Fahan in modern-day Co. Donegal in the north-west of Ireland. An ecclesiastic, on his death in 887, Máel Muru is lauded as 'royal poet of Ireland' (*rígfhile Érenn*) and as a most wonderful *senchaid*, a term denoting one concerned with *senchas*, knowledge of the past.[68] Thus, Máel Muru was acknowledged for his excellence in history-writing in his own time.

In his composition, Máel Muru adopts the same synchronistic approach evident in the *Historia Brittonum*, and certain sources and models are common to both. A biblically-inspired scheme provides the framework within which subject peoples are placed. The Irish poet is similarly concerned with interconnected dynasties, but underlying their association is common descent. A prominent theme of the work is the ancestry of various Irish groups linked to settlers who had wandered in Egypt and Scythia before taking Ireland from Spain. The parallels with God's chosen people resonate; in according numerous dynasties such elevated lineage, contemporary circumstances are being addressed.

[63] Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 22 and 63 (§ 17).
[64] Walter Goffart, 'The Supposedly Frankish Table of Nations: An Edition and Study', in idem, *Rome's Fall and After* (London: Hambledon Press, 1989), 133–64; see Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, 441.
[65] See above, note 2. Fredegar, *Chronicarum quae dicuntur Fredegari scholastici libri IV cum continuationibus*, ed. Bruno Krusch. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum 2 (Hanover: Hahn, 1888), 18–93, and, using Krusch's text, Stéphane Lebecq, ed. and trans., *La geste des rois des Francs: Liber historiae Francorum*. Les classiques de l'histoire au moyen âge 54 (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2015).
[66] Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 18 and 59 (§§ 1–6).
[67] Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 22–5 and 64–5 (§§ 19–27).
[68] Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, eds., *The Annals of Ulster to A.D. 1131* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), 342–3.

Origins have immediacy, bestowing authority on those furnished with the right ancestral lines. This legitimisation is expressed in the vernacular, whereas ninth-century politics reverberate in Latin in the *Historia Brittonum*. Like his earlier British counterpart, in writing his history in Irish, Máel Muru also made an active linguistic choice.

This is underlined by the presence in the *Historia Brittonum* itself of strands presented in much more detail in the later vernacular poem. Reference to 'three sons of a soldier of Spain' (*tres filii militis Hispaniae*) in the British text, is an allusion to Míl Espáine (Míl of Spain), ancestor of the Irish, according to *Can a mbunadas na nGáedel* and other compositions.[69] Elsewhere in the *Historia*, it is claimed that the Irish are descended from a Scythian nobleman who was expelled from Egypt, as is elaborated in the Irish poem.[70] Moreover, according to the author of *Historia Brittonum*, this was related to him by Irish scholars, as noted above.[71] While an exchange such as that postulated is most likely to have been conducted in Latin, that the British author had direct recourse to sources in Irish remains a possibility. Learned discussion in Latin of the origins of the Irish was a feature of Carolingian scholarly discourse around the time Máel Muru was writing his poem.[72] Latin formed an important part of his own intellectual training as a cleric; setting out the origins of the Irish in the vernacular was a conscious decision on his part.

In turning to the vernacular to write history, Máel Muru is likely to have been familiar with earlier texts in Irish recounting the origins of particular groups. Prominent among these are seventh-century genealogical poems concerned with Leinster, in which an ancestor figure Labraid Loingsech ('the exiled one') is linked directly to Míl of Spain and through him to Noah and Adam. Descent of the Irish more generally is traced back to Japheth in the same corpus.[73] But Máel Muru's composition is the earliest extant work to set out an overarching account of the origins of the Irish. Moreover, the correct order of events and their veracity are his primary concerns. His aim is to relate the sequence and proper arrangement of the history (*senchas*) of the Irish.[74] The resulting account is a *croinic*, as he describes it towards the end, employing a vernacular rendering of Latin *chronica*.[75] Moreover this is a structured 'chronicle' with a beginning, middle and end (*medon acus tossach acus dead*).[76] Nothing is more veracious or clearer than what has been related; his is a pronouncement that is true.[77] In his view, authority

[69] Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 20 and 61 (§ 13); the *senchas* related in the Irish poem is set out as a history of the sons of Míl: Todd., ed., *Leabhar Breathnach*, 220–71.
[70] Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 21 and 62 (§ 15); according to the Irish poem, the path was from Egypt to Scythia: Todd., ed., *Leabhar Breathnach*, 232–3 (ll. 92–100).
[71] Morris, ed., *Nennius*, 21 and 62 (§ 15).
[72] See Clarke, '*Leabhar Gabhála*', 454–6, and Olivier Szerwiniack, 'D'Orose au *LGÉ*', *Études Celtiques* 31 (1995): 205–17.
[73] Kuno Meyer, ed., *Über die älteste irische Dichtung*, I: *Rhythmische, alliterierende Reimstrophen* (Berlin: Verlag der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1913), 27–31 (*Énna Labraid, lúad cáich*), 39–50 (*Nuadu necht, ní dámair anflaith*); for discussion, see Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Creating the Past: The Early Irish Genealogical Tradition', *Peritia* 12 (1998): 177–208 (201–2).
[74] 'sreth senchasa mac Míled' ('the arrangement of the *senchas* of the sons of Míl'), 'ord senchasa mac Míled' ('the order of the *senchas* of the sons of Míl'): Todd, ed., *Leabhar Breathnach*, 224–5 (ll. 23–4, 27).
[75] This may be the earliest attested occurrence of the word: *An Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language, based on the Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913–76), s.v. *croinic*, at dil.ie/13082.
[76] Todd., ed., *Leabhar Breathnach*, 268–9 (ll. 327, 329–30).
[77] 'Cona faigbe ní ba fíriu / na bas leriu' ('there will be found to be nothing more true or more plain'); 'a sanais fír' ('their true history'): Todd, ed., *Leabhar Breathnach*, 268–9 (ll. 333–4, 335).

and order are best expressed in the vernacular, at least in the context of *Can a mbunadas na nGáedel*.

This view may be connected with the contemporary political resonance of the poem which legitimises a large number of dynasties, incorporating them into the official version – the history of the sons of Míl (*senchas mac Míled*) – but also deliberately sets six groups apart.[78] This is history with a purpose, designed to authenticate a version of the past shaped by current concerns. In constructing his history, Máel Muru was directed by the foremost political dynasty in his day, Uí Néill, situated in the northern part of Ireland. Significantly, he appears to have been associated at different points in his career with its two main branches. His monastery of Fahan came within the remit of the Northern Uí Néill; towards the end of his poetic career he composed a eulogy to the king of the opposing group, Flann Sinna of the Southern Uí Néill.[79] Depicted by the poet as a universal ruler, entitled to tribute from all the peoples of the world, Flann Sinna is portrayed as worthy of authority over the various groups that made up the Irish, as set out in *Can a mbunadas na nGáedel*.[80] This point is not made explicitly, and the progenitors of the two main lines of Uí Néill – 'Niall of the North' and 'Niall of the South' – are to the fore when Máel Muru turns to enumerating the important dynasties of his own day.[81] This is accommodating, subtle history, no doubt appreciated by contemporaries. Expounded in Latin in continental circles, the origins of the Irish had a politically focused vernacular variety as well.

Biblical origins were central to that vernacular version, as well as the taking of Ireland by peoples from overseas. Significantly, mastery of language is also underlined; Fénius, ancestor of the Irish, having visited the Tower of Babel, is said to have been 'a deeply learned man who excelled in every language'.[82] His son, Nél, had command of all 'the languages of the world' (*berla in betha*).[83] Emphasis on universal language is resonant of an earlier treatise, *Auraicept na nÉces* ('The Poets' Primer') in which Latin and Irish are aligned in both status and significance.[84] The prestige of the vernacular of Máel Muru's poem is reflected in its elevated metrical style and employment of complex ornamental patterns. The refined art of poetry involved engagement with language at a particularly intense level and its focus on phonology and phonetics brought a nexus of verbal rules into play. Poetic form signified a specific register and one clearly considered appropriate for an overarching origin tale of the Irish.

West Saxon vernacular annals and origins

Origin legends of the multiple English kingdoms of Britain are synthesised in the common stock of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, to the advantage of the West Saxon dynasty whose interests it promotes. The common stock does not provide a single

[78] Todd, ed., *Leabhar Breathnach*, 270–1 (ll. 323–6).
[79] For what is known of Máel Muru and his career, see John Carey, 'In Search of Mael Muru Othna', in *Clerics, Kings and Vikings: Essays on Medieval Ireland in Honour of Donnchadh Ó Corráin*, eds. Emer Purcell and others (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015), 429–39.
[80] See Carey, 'In Search of Mael Muru', 433–5 and 437–8.
[81] Todd, ed., *Leabhar Breathnach*, 252–3 (ll. 241–2).
[82] 'Fer ard adma ro bíd co amra / in cech berlu': Todd, ed., *Leabhar Breathnach*, 228–9 (ll. 51–2, 60).
[83] Todd, ed., *Leabhar Breathnach*, 228–9 (l. 60).
[84] Ahlqvist, ed., and trans., *Early Irish Linguist*.

origin legend for the English, but rather offers parallel geographical and genealogical narratives for the beginning of the West Saxons and many of the English kingdoms of Britain. This synthesis is placed within a synchronising framework which situates Britain and England with respect to Roman history, both imperial and ecclesiastical.

In the annals for the mid fifth to the very early sixth century, the geographical paralleling is structured around the repetition of the migration trope of related men, often with alliterating names, arriving in small boats at specific places and killing or driving off the Britons. A range of etymological games mark both the personal and place-names, for example, Port founds Portsmouth.[85] Within the chronology of the annals, the trope is applied to the leaders who arrived in coastal areas including Kent, Sussex, the Isle of Wight, South Hampshire and Wessex; that is, to the West Saxons and to those kingdoms along the south coast that had become subject to their hegemony: the famous Hengist and Horsa are the best known here. These stories are a trope, shared across Latin Europe (as well as beyond), and not distinctly English. The same trope occurs in Jordanes' *History of the Goths*, Paul the Deacon's *History of the Lombards* and Widukind's *Deeds of the Saxons*. It is not, moreover, a Germanic trope. Most obviously we find it in the *Aeneid*, where Aeneas is accompanied by his father Anchises and his son Ascanius, as they flee Troy with a fleet to found Rome.[86] There is a striking distinction, however, in the common stock's deployment of the trope: the ships arrive in Britain, but they have no origin, no departure point (even though they do in Bede who is the source here).[87] A trope which elsewhere in early medieval historical writing is used to claim origins across Africa, Asia (especially but not exclusively Troy) and Europe, is here used to represent the English (who famously and actively eschew Trojan origins) as without connections elsewhere.[88]

In annals for the mid sixth to early seventh century, the common stock includes genealogies tracing the major English royal houses north of the Thames (except Essex) and the West Saxons back to Woden (the euhemerised Germanic god) or further.[89] The same is true later in the extended annal covering 855–8, the last years and death of King Æthelwulf, Alfred's father. This annal revises the West Saxon royal genealogy, expanding it beyond Woden, so that the dynasty traces itself back to Adam via Noah: genealogies shared with other Germanic-speaking peoples and biblical genealogies, and thus histories, are combined. This reference to descent from Noah is unusual. It is also the first attestation of the addition of a fourth, Ark-born son, Sceaf, to the three sons who survived the Flood with Noah. Named in the Bible, these sons are developed by the Church Fathers, including Bede, into the progenitors of the peoples of Africa (Ham), Asia (Sem) and Europe (Japheth).[90] Sceaf, along with Sceldwa, Beaw and Heremod,

[85] *ASC*, *s.a.* 501.
[86] *ASC*, *s.a.* 449, 477, 495, 501 and 514. For discussion, see Yorke, 'Anglo-Saxon Origin Legends', 16–17, 20 and 26–7; and Elizabeth M. Tyler and George Younge, 'Moving People, Moving Forms: Narrating Migration in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles', in *Migrants in Medieval England, c.500–c.1500*, eds. W. Mark Ormrod, Joanna Story and Elizabeth M. Tyler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 144–74 (156–8).
[87] Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, eds. Colgrave and Mynors, 50–1 (I.15).
[88] Elizabeth M. Tyler, 'Trojans in Anglo-Saxon England: Precedent without Descent', *Review of English Studies* 64 (2013): 1–20.
[89] *ASC*, *s.a.* 547, 552, 560, 597, 626 and see also 757. Dorothy Whitelock, 'The Old English Bede', in eadem, *From Bede to Alfred: Studies in Early Anglo-Saxon Literature and History* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1980), 57–90 (72–4).
[90] This is a brief account of a complex topic; for comprehensive treatment, see Daniel Anlezark, 'Sceaf, Japheth and the Origins of the Anglo-Saxons', *Anglo-Saxon England* 31 (2002): 13–46 (14–15 and 18–27), and the work he builds on there.

are figures named in *Beowulf*. Although the presence of these names in the poem and genealogy is a complex topic, two points are salient here. First *Beowulf* illustrates that Sceaf and the other additions are understood to be Danes. Thus, the common stock represents the English dynasties as sharing descent with the very people whom it recounts as invaders and whom the West Saxons are simultaneously attempting to defeat and to incorporate into the West Saxon realm, acknowledging their military and political power.[91] From a linguistic perspective, the Æthelwulf annal creates a genealogical link between two insular peoples whose languages are mutually intelligible, while using Sceaf to disconnect the English from the rest of Europe (including Ireland and Wales), Africa and Asia. From a wider European perspective, it is worth noting that ninth-century Carolingian additions of Scandinavian origins for the Franks took place not only in the context of attempts to convert and incorporate these settlers within the realm, as in Wessex, but also in the context of increased awareness of the links between Germanic languages.[92] But this move does not entail the creation of the exclusive genealogies and origin legends that we find in the common stock. A second point arises from the link with *Beowulf*. In the opening lines of the poem, Scyld, infant son of Sceaf, arrives in a boat alone from nowhere and goes on to become the progenitor of the Scylding dynasty. This further arrival without a departure drives home the importance of this theme in the common stock's origin legend.

A further striking feature of these parallel origin legends of the English kingdoms, as recounted in the common stock, lies in the absence of ethnic vocabulary either for the English as a whole, or for the separate kingdoms. In contrast, the British are ethnicised from the first annal. The first two references to the English in the common stock, which come in quick succession and not until the very end of the sixth century, are revealing. The annal for 596, which describes the mission Gregory the Great sent to the English, closely translates the Latin *gens Anglorum* of Bede's *Chronica minora*, as *þeod Engla*. Here English represents an ecclesiastical identity and a Graeco-Roman ethnographic category applied from the outside, ultimately by Gregory, rather than an internal identity.[93] The next annal for 597 then deploys the term *Angelcynn* (English) as a political and ethnic concept in the specific context of West Saxon aggression. Ceolwulf, whose genealogy is given back to Woden, becomes king of Wessex and proceeds to fight 'either against the English, or the Britons, or the Picts, or the Scots' (*oþþe wiþ Angelcyn, oþþe uuiþ Walas, oþþe with Peohtas, oþþe with Scottas*). Although the *Angelcynn* is an ethnic category of Germanic linguistic formation, the terms remain Bedan (these people correspond to the vernacular languages which Bede identifies in his first chapter). Fascinatingly, ethnicity and language are invoked here in a vision not of a West Saxon English kingdom. The vision is rather a more imperial one, of the West Saxons

[91] As, for example, in the baptism of Guthrum with Alfred as godfather, recounted in the common stock (*ASC*, *s.a.* 878). For discussion, see Alexander Callander Murray, '*Beowulf*, the Danish Invasions and Royal Genealogy', in *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. Colin Chase (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 101–11 (105).
[92] Coumert, *Origines des peuples*, 373–8.
[93] The ethnographic category, *Angli*, recalls language attributed to Gregory the Great; that is the perspective from sixth-century Rome: see Bertram Colgrave, ed. and trans., *The Earliest Life of Gregory the Great* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1968), 90–1 (§ 9), and Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, eds. Colgrave and Mynors, 132–5 (II.1). For discussion of Roman ethnography as it relates to Northern people, see Roland Steinacher, 'Rome and Its Created Northerners', in *Interrogating the 'Germanic': A Category and Its Uses in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. Matthias Friedrich and James M. Harland (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 31–66 (34–5).

dominating all the peoples of Britain. Thereafter, there are only seven further instances of *Angelcynn* in the common stock, always in the context of conflict with the Danes or with regard to the English quarter in Rome.[94]

The common stock account of English origins has implications for audience and language choice. Its simplicity and clarity stand in sharp contrast to the *Historia Brittonum* and Máel Muru's poem: where these texts make displays of their learning and signal scholarly audiences, the common stock remains silent. Contemporary Frankish historical-writing is similarly demanding, with the story of the Franks being told in scholarly compilations of Merovingian and Carolingian texts rather than synthesised; the result is a multiplicity of versions of Frankish history.[95] The common stock, which draws on many of the same sources as the *Historia Brittonum* and *Can a mbunadas na nGáedel* and which fits this material into AD dating, represents scholarship of the highest order. Although its virtuosity would be apparent to any learned reader, the common stock does not require or project a learned audience for its reception; indeed it is designed for a wider audience, who could either read it themselves or hear it read, as Asser portrays at the end of his *Life of Alfred*.[96]

A dimension of the common stock's inclusion of a non-scholarly audience is the absence of metalinguistic commentary noted above. The famous *Preface* to the Old English translation of Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, addressed in Alfred's voice to bishops receiving the text, provides insight into how the common stock's vision of the English relates to the choice to produce a chronicle in the vernacular. In the *Preface*, Alfred surveys England north and south of the Humber and south of the Thames. At the same time, he invokes English as the language 'that we all know' (*þe we ealle gecnwen mægen*), that is, as a marker of shared identity. Although these two moves have been interpreted as demotic, they are equally strikingly imperial, in the sense of subsuming multiple peoples under one rule. First, he erases the distinct political identities of the historically independent English kingdoms, such as Mercia and Northumbria. Second, in imagining English as a shared written language, he either excludes significant Scandinavian and Brittonic speaking populations or presents them with a written language which is not their own. Alfred's *Preface* seeks to give authority to the vernacular by weaving together the place of spoken English as a marker of ethnic identity with imperial models for written language.[97]

[94] *ASC*, *s.a.* 787, 816, 836, 866, 874, 885 and 886. On *Angelcynn*, contrast Pauline Stafford, 'The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, Identity and the Making of England', *Haskins Society Journal* 17 (2008 for 2007): 28–52 (32–4); and George Molyneaux, 'The *Old English Bede*: English Ideology of Christian Instruction?', *English Historical Review* 124 (2009): 1289–1323 (1316–18), with Sarah Foot, 'The Making of *Angelcynn*: English Identity before the Norman Conquest', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 6 (1996): 25–49; but see now her 'Where English Becomes British: Rethinking Contexts for *Brunanburh*', in *Myth, Rulership, Church and Charters: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Brooks*, eds. Julia Barrow and Andrew Wareham (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 127–44.

[95] See above, note 2, and especially McKitterick, *History and Memory*, 20.

[96] Asser, *De rebus gestis Ælfredi*, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, ed. and trans. W.H. Stevenson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904; reprinted with an article on recent work by Dorothy Whitelock, 1959), 92–5 (§ 106), and trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 109–10.

[97] This paragraph and the next draw on Elizabeth M. Tyler, 'Cross-Channel Networks of History Writing: The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*', in *Medieval Historical Writing: Britain and Ireland, 500–1500*, eds. Jennifer Jahner, Emily Steiner and Elizabeth M. Tyler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 172–91 (175–7); and see especially Malcolm Godden, 'Prologues and Epilogues in the Old English *Pastoral Care* and their Carolingian Models', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 110 (2011): 441–73 (455–9); and Francis Leneghan, '*Translatio imperii*: The Old English *Orosius* and the Rise of Wessex', *Anglia* 133 (2015): 656–705.

This imperial paradigm for written language becomes explicit when the *Preface* deploys the trope of *translatio imperii et studii*, building on the common structuring principle of the movement of empires and learning westwards through time.[98] In the *Preface*, both dominion and learning move from East to West as first the Greeks and then Romans translate the Bible into their own languages. The designation of the Romans as *Lædenware* (Latin people) underscores both the importance of language to identity in the *Preface* and that that identity can be as much imperial as ethnic, or both imperial and ethnic. English is being crafted into an imperial written vernacular. The debt of this theoretical approach to Otfrid of Weissenburg's prefaces to the *Evangelienbuch* underscores this imperial dimension. The *Evangelienbuch*, an Old High German poetic version of the Gospels made between 863 and 871, was dedicated to the Carolingian king of the East Franks and contender for the title of emperor, Louis the German. Otfrid represents Greek and Latin as vernaculars in their use to translate the Bible, and in that connection argued that German, the language of the Franks, imperial successors to the Romans, should be a written language.[99] Both Roman and Carolingian models of imperial language are at stake.

Looking back to the form, style and content of the common stock, we see that it enacts a *translatio imperii et studii* for written English: the common stock begins with Julius Caesar's attempt to conquer Britain, that is, history begins when the Romans set foot in Britain. The annal for 449 enacts the *translatio* – Mauritus and Valentinus succeed to the throne in Rome as Hengist and Horsa arrive in Ebbesfleet. The simple parataxis of this entry, which marks the style of the common stock as a whole, is not a sign of the primitive state of Old English prose (which was used at the same time for translating the complex Latin of Orosius' *History* and Boethius' *Consolation*) but faithfully renders the style of Roman annals into English.[100] Although English descent is from Woden, with no glance at the Trojans, Egyptians or Spaniards, the language, form and content of the common stock enacts a *translatio imperii et studii* which reveals a metalinguistic level underlying the text.

The identity of Alfred's advisers in devising his vernacular educational programme is also illuminating, corroborating the view that the choice to use English was the result of high-level theorising and policy. Apart from Plegmund, the Mercian archbishop of Canterbury, none of these men is English; Asser comes from Wales, while Grimbald is a Frank and John a Saxon. Both Asser and potentially Grimbald had direct experiences of history-writing: Grimbald, from St Bertin and Reims, may well have been the route by which a compilation of Frankish history including the *Royal Frankish Annals* reached the West Saxon court.[101] Asser probably knew the *Historia Brittonum* and translated much of the common stock into Latin in his *Life of Alfred*, for which he also drew on

[98] A classic description of the theory remains Werner Goez, *Translatio imperii: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Geschichtsdenkens und der politischen Theorien im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1958).
[99] Oskar Erdmann and Ludwig Wolff, eds., *Otfrids Evangelienbuch*. 6th edn. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1973); see the prefaces to King Louis the German, Archbishop Liutbert of Mainz and Bishop Solomon of Constance (1–9) and § 1.1 (11–14). Only the Latin letter to Liutbert has been translated into English: Francis Magoun, 'Otfrid's *Ad Liutbertum*', *Proceedings of the Modern Languages Association* 58 (1943): 869–90. For an introduction to Otfrid, see Wolfgang Haubrichs, *Die Anfänge: Versuche volkssprachiger Schriftlichkeit im frühen Mittelalter*, vol 1.1: *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von den Anfängen bis zum Beginn der Neuzeit*, ed. Joachim Heinzle (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1995), 292–312.
[100] Cecily Clark, 'The Narrative Mode of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* before the Conquest', in *Words, Names and History: Selected Papers*, ed. Peter Jackson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995), 3–19 (1–8); R.W. Burgess and Michael Kulikowski, *Mosaics of Time: The Latin Chronicle Tradition from the First Century BC to the Sixth Century AD*, vol. 1: *A Historical Introduction to the Chronicle Genre from its Origins to the High Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 20–35 and 208; and Tyler and Younge, 'Moving People, Moving Forms', 156.

Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne*.[102] Meanwhile both Asser and John came from regions where written vernaculars were used. Examples of Welsh vernacular writing have already been noted; the Saxon *Heliand*, a vernacular epic of the life of Christ, may have come to England (where it was copied in the tenth century) with John.[103] The ties to the Carolingian realm of John and Grimbald signal the connections which may have brought knowledge of Otfrid to Alfred's court. Alfred's ambitious and radical decision to pursue a vernacular educational programme in English, including the production of a chronicle, was made and forwarded by a group of advisers from across Britain and Francia, and it served the purposes of an expanding West Saxon kingship. The decision to use English was taken by a multilingual and multi-ethnic group who had a long chronological and wide geographical view. They looked back to Greece and Rome and across to the Carolingian empire and were fully aware of their insular context.[104]

Conclusion

Our three case studies emanate from multilingual, scholarly environments and position the various peoples whose origins they present in a common, learned frame. They do so choosing either Latin or vernacular for specific reasons. Thinking across the trio of ninth-century origin stories emanating from various regions of Britain and Ireland enables the writing of Latin and vernacular languages to be considered more broadly within and beyond this insular context. In all three case studies, linguistic theorisation and multilingual interactions not only shaped language choice but were themes of the origin legends themselves, whether explicitly or implicitly. What also becomes clear is that vernacular languages, just like Latin, require sustained institutional support to flourish. What language to write history in emerges as a pressing question in the ninth century, across Britain and Ireland.

Writing in the vernacular brings with it intense engagement with, and consideration of language. This has a practical dimension at the level of syntax, style and poetic register. Máel Muru's account in polished, skilful metre is the perfect vessel for the observations on universal language that are a feature of the poem. In his composition, theory of language is biblically inspired, and so Irish is accommodated and given authority by divine sanction. By contrast, the common stock of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, when read with Alfred's *Preface* to the *Pastoral Care*, made the justification for the writing of English by drawing on imperial models. In both cases the vernacular is accorded status and authority; it becomes a central component in the recounting of origins and construction of the past.

The account of origins related in the *Historia Brittonum* references multiple histories, while highlighting a link with Rome. In this context, Latin is conceived of as a suitable, all-encompassing medium, addressing the range of audiences whose origin stories are

[101] Scharer, 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', 165–8; and Malcolm Parkes, 'The Palaeography of the Parker Manuscript of the *Chronicle*, Laws and Sedulius, and Historiography at Winchester in the Late Ninth and Tenth Centuries', *Anglo-Saxon England* 5 (1976): 149–71 (163–6).
[102] Keynes and Lapidge, trans. *Alfred the Great*, 54; 229, n. 6; and 232, n. 20.
[103] Michael Lapidge, 'Some Latin Poems as Evidence for the Reign of Athelstan', in idem, *Anglo-Latin Literature: 900–1066* (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), 49–86 (65–71).
[104] This paragraph draws on Tyler, 'Cross-Channel Networks', 174–7.

told. Arguably, the author's depiction of an interpreter in one specific episode may underline the limits of vernacular language. Latin, the language of Rome, can give expression to the origins of the many interrelated groups at this text's core. The peoples depicted in the *Historia Brittonum* form a collective by means of Latin; yet use of the vernacular in the other two texts is not explicitly presented as a straightforward corollary of ethnic or national identity. On the contrary, both Máel Muru, on the one hand, and the author of the common stock of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, on the other, shape their very different histories more broadly, by looking back to antiquity and across and beyond the Mediterranean world.

The creation of those vernacular histories was the direct result of royal and ecclesiastical support. The considered, deliberate decision to write in Irish and English respectively was not demotic but determined by secular and ecclesiastical elites who instrumentalised the written vernacular. Written vernacular languages do not emerge and then develop on their own, they have to be actively promoted by patrons in order to flourish. Indeed, their use can diminish, as well as rise. Vernacular chronicling in England falls away during the tenth century in Athelstan's reign as Latin texts are cultivated.[105] Otfrid wrote his rhyming *Evangelienbuch* in German shortly before Máel Muru and the anonymous author of the common stock produced their texts in the vernacular. In the absence of institutional support (which Otfrid actively sought), however, German did not become an extensively written language. With hindsight, Otfrid's promotion of vernacular writing looks like an experiment that, for all its initial support, ultimately floundered.[106]

Reference to Otfrid in the context of our insular case studies reminds us that use of written vernacular was without doubt an entangled phenomenon from Ireland to East Francia and beyond. The conversation about writing the vernacular which is especially audible in Alfred's *Preface* to the *Pastoral Care* was replicated across this expansive space. And at its heart was not a Frankish model being accepted or rejected by a peripheral insular world. While Carolingian texts and clerics provided inspiration and influence in the case of the three insular texts examined here, it should be emphasised that the early experiments in the writing of Old High German and Old Saxon were made in monastic foundations with close ties (whether direct or indirect) to Irish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries. Even in the ninth century, the ties of Otfrid and the author of the Old Saxon *Heliand* to Fulda, founded by Boniface, remind us of the importance of those connections for Carolingian vernacular writing. Being alert to connections from Ireland to East Francia does not mean homogenising; on the contrary, difference needs to be understood as part of a conversation. Irish and English origin legends were not written in the vernacular in isolation from the use of Latin for the *Historia Brittonum*. Latin, prominently cultivated in both Ireland and England, as well as Wales, is the *sine qua non* of the entanglements across the Welsh, Irish and English speaking mutually unintelligible languages, even as entangledness proves to be the essence of vernacular writing.

[105] Stafford, *After Alfred*, 52, 70 and 90–3.
[106] Haubrichs, *Die Anfänge*, 364–5.

Acknowledgments

We are greatly indebted to Dr Ben Guy and Professor Wim Verbaal for comments on this contribution and to Professor Thomas O'Donnell for generous discussion; we are grateful too to Dr Rebecca Thomas for permission to cite research which forms part of her 2019 University of Cambridge doctoral thesis and which will appear in a forthcoming volume (see note 42).

Note on contributors

Máire Ní Mhaonaigh is Professor of Celtic and Medieval Studies in the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of St John's College. She works at the interface of history and literature, her research focusing on medieval constructions of the past. Among recent publications is a co-authored volume, *Norse-Gaelic Contacts in a Viking World*, with Colmán Etchingham, Jón Vidar Sigurðsson and Elizabeth Ashman Rowe (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), exploring the cultural and political connections between Norse and Gaelic speakers in the high Middle Ages.

Elizabeth Tyler is Professor of Medieval Literature in the Department of English and Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of York. Among her recent publications is *England in Europe: English Royal Women and Literary Patronage, c.1000–c.1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017) and *Medieval Historical Writing in Britain and Ireland, 500–1500*, with Jennifer Jahner and Emily Steiner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). She co-directs the Centre for Medieval Literature (www.sdu.dk/cml), a Danish Centre of Excellence, and the Centre for Medieval Studies at York. Her research works across literature and history focusing on history-writing, poetry and vernacularisation in Latin Europe, with a specialisation on England in the early and high Middle Ages.