A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies
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The editors would like to express their gratitude to the many people who helped to bring this project to fruition. Our first debt is to the volume's contributors, from whom we have learned more than we could have imagined possible at the outset. For the symposium on “Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Studies,” hosted by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) in September 2009, we are grateful for support from the College of Letters and Sciences, the Center for Advanced Study, and the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities, as well as the following academic units: Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory, Program in Medieval Studies, School of Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics, Department of English, Program in Jewish Culture and Society, Department of Classics, Gender and Women’s Studies, Department of Anthropology, Department of Philosophy, Center for Translation Studies, Comparative and World Literature, and Art History Program. The University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) also provided financial support, and thanks are due to the Office of the Provost. Shannon Godlove at UIUC saw to it that everything at the symposium ran smoothly, and Skye Solmonson at UTA put in many hours of diligent work to prepare the final manuscript for submission.

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We gesetton on þissum enchiridion (þæt ys manualis on Lyden and handboc on Englisc) manega þing ymbe gerimcræft forþon we woldon þæt iunge men mihton þe leohtlicor þæt Lyden ongitan and wið ealde preostas ymbe þas þing þe rumlicor sprecan, and we woldon þæt þas word heom wurdon cuðe forþon hig synd mìd myclum geswince mancynne geswutelode. (Byrhtferth’s Enchiridion, 120)

(We set down in this enchiridion (that is manualis in Latin and handbook in English) many things about computus because we wished that young men might more easily understand the Latin and converse at greater length [lit. “speak more spaciously”] with old priests about these things, and we wished that these words would be known to them because they are made clear to mankind with great effort.)

In introducing this Handbook to Anglo-Saxon Studies we, like Byrhtferth one thousand years ago, are in the position of reflecting on the purpose and aims of the handbook genre. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, Byrhtferth’s text should be of little assistance to us in this aim, since the modern term handbook is said to descend from the nineteenth-century German handbuch rather than the Old English handboc, which apparently referred somewhat strictly to a volume of liturgical material. With no suggestion of a standard content, we can surmise that Old English handbec contained a diverse range of material, such as homilies and charms, useful to the performance of the ecclesiastical office. As such they would have resembled collectanea rather than volumes with overt editorial or authorial intervention, and probably lacked a controlling writerly “voice” serving to mediate, explain, or otherwise justify the textual selections therein. In this respect the Old English handboc would seem to differ significantly from the contemporary handbook, the material of which is shaped and constricted with the aim of providing a...
comprehensive but portable overview of a topic. Contemporary handbooks are generally written for dilettantes or tourists rather than specialist practitioners; or they are written for novices, those who know little about a subject and who may not care to linger long in its territories. In order to serve both types of audience, modern handbooks not only tend to categorize, classify, and simplify, but also offer themselves as repositories of information, portals where questions will be answered rather than raised. Thus the one salient point of connection that modern handbooks might seem to have with Old English handbec is the literal: both designate volumes that are small enough to fit in your hand.

Byrhtferth’s comments on his own handbec (or Enchiridion), however, not only reveal a more expansive notion of the genre than the OED definition implies was current in Anglo-Saxon culture, but are also instructive for us in thinking about and in explaining the desired aims of this Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies. These comments are thus worth examining in greater depth. First are Byrhtferth’s stated claims. He notes that the Enchiridion will contain not everything but “manega þing ymbe gerimcæft” (many things about computus), and he thus explicitly eschews any claim to universality or comprehensiveness. Computus, the method for calculating the date of Easter, was central to the observance of the Christian calendar and was a fundamental aspect of monastic education. Following immediately on these words is a statement of purpose that reveals to what extent the volume is driven by the aim of imparting knowledge about computus: using an authorial plural, Byrhtferth observes that he has written the text because “we woldon þæt iunge men mihton þe leohtlicor þæt Lyden ongitan and wið ealde preostas ymbe þas þing þe rumlicor sprecan” (“we wished that young men might more easily understand the Latin and converse at greater length [lit. ‘speak more spaciously’] with old priests about these things”). Unlike a contemporary handbook, which functions to introduce the fundamentals of a subject, the Enchiridion is concerned as much with language learning as it is with the acquisition of knowledge about computus. The form of the Enchiridion is thus intended simultaneously to induct a novice in two specialist discourses, Latin and computus, and it can legitimately be described as a handbook to both subjects. The bilingual nature of the text ultimately complicates any simple approach to the handbook as a content-driven mode: as that type of text from which the reader hopes simply to extract information. In addition, Byrhtferth’s comments indicate that the parameters of the Enchiridion extend beyond the confines of the book itself and into the corridors of the monastery. As he writes, he hopes that his work will allow young monks and old priests to speak “more spaciously” about computus. This delightful image of the ways in which a written text can and should open up room for informed conversation surely resonates with most scholars, even though it might not be an outcome expected from the somewhat pedestrian genre of the handbook.

As even this short extract makes clear, Byrhtferth’s Enchiridion is far from being just a gathering place for those ecclesiastical texts required for the correct performance of monastic duties. Utility is not necessarily the governing principle of the Enchiridion, which, we learn in recent scholarship on the text, is also a highly
idiosyncratic volume about language politics and monastic identity, the effects of which are often in direct contradiction to its stated aims. In the above scene, for instance, Byrhtferth acknowledges that an ancillary aim of setting down computistical information, *gerimcraeft*, in his book is to facilitate a conversation between novice priests, whose skills in reading Latin still need to be polished, and their older counterparts. But how reliable is this as a claim for authorial exigence? Should we take for granted the way Byrhtferth maps Latin competency in terms of a generational divide, or should we be suspicious about the existence of this group of self-evidently learned older monks? Might they, too, be intended to benefit from Byrhtferth’s efforts to express computistical complexity with the clarity of the vernacular? The question of who this *handboc* is for opens up quickly into consideration of the multiple and overlapping audiences to which it is both explicitly and implicitly addressed.

Our discussion of the word *handbook* has thus far been voiced in both of the “two languages” that Allen Frantzen identified in his seminal 1991 collection *Speaking Two Languages* as a feature of the critical discourse employed by any Anglo-Saxonist interested in theory. In beginning with a historical analysis of a word, we are not far from the disciplinary “comfort zone” for Anglo-Saxon studies, long dominated by textual study and specifically philological aims. However, in our attention to discordance – for instance, between stated authorial aims and underlying textual effects – and our acknowledgment that contemporary meanings and concerns inevitably intrude into our work, we are indebted in obvious ways to theory and the changes it has wrought on the practice of humanistic study. Like Anglo-Saxonists, we start with one word; like new historicists, we start anecdotally, packing and unpacking the material of our introduction into and out of one example. In this duality lies the point of this volume, which in many respects aims to erase a troublesome sense of division between the practice of theory and Anglo-Saxon studies: what would it look like to make the two languages one?

Like the *Enchiridion*, then, this *Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies* aims to introduce two intertwined discourses – in our case, the discourses of Anglo-Saxon studies and critical theory – for novices in the discipline. But it also hopes to allow scholars at all levels of the discipline to speak “more spaciously,” and it sets out to challenge the view that to do so means that you must always be “speaking two languages.” As the essays in this volume demonstrate, Anglo-Saxon studies and critical theory share a significant number of overlapping interests and concerns; like Latin and computus, we cannot know one without the other. Also like the *Enchiridion*, this *Handbook* aims to be useful to its audience beyond the novitiate, for the ongoing practice of their chosen discipline – a discipline that has been considerably altered since it first began to engage with critical theory. It seems both useful and desirable, then, to consider the ways in which the intertwined histories of Anglo-Saxon studies and critical theory have shaped the current state of the field.

In 1937, Max Horkheimer asked the deceptively simple question, “What is ‘theory?’” (188). His answer was far more complicated: theory, he said, must have a comprehensive explanatory power; but *critical* theory must also have the power to
reflect back upon and restructure the initial terms of inquiry. Horkheimer’s formulation emphasizes the importance of critical theory as a transformative tool of intellectual discourse, and in the decades since, the field of study known as “critical theory” has effected an epistemological shift in the practices of academia. Beginning in the 1950s and 1960s with the battles over semiotics, scholars across the disciplines began to focus on the constructed nature of knowledge, from the fundamentals of language to the institutional structures of the university. The premise that linguistic meaning is arbitrary calls into question all meaning, all knowledge, built on the slippery foundations of language, and what followed amounted to no less than a revolution in how scholars were able to think about both their objects of study and the structure of their disciplines. Structuralism and poststructuralism ruled out the possibility of “givens” or “first principles,” and the theory revolution meant that we could no longer study history, art, literature, politics, religion, or indeed any of the social or humanistic sciences without careful attention to the ways in which any such knowledge must be contingent – on the means of production, on the political context, even on our own subjectivities as historically embedded scholars. As Thomas McLaughlin writes in the Introduction to *Critical Terms for Literary Study*:

The basic premises of criticism have been interrogated, again and again, from perspectives as diverse as feminism, deconstruction, Marxism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and reader-response theory. What holds these various and often combative programs and schools of thought together under the rubric of theory is a shared commitment to understanding how language and other systems of signs provide frameworks which determine how we read, and more generally, how we make sense of experience, construct our own identity, produce meaning in the world. (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 1)

The resulting inquiries, hedged about as they are with caveats and qualifications, nevertheless answer the needs of newer generations of scholars who are both demographically and intellectually more diverse than their early twentieth-century counterparts, and their influence has spread far beyond their origins in philosophy and literary studies. Considerations of subjectivity – of how aspects such as class, race, and gender can impact even the most seemingly objective investigations – underwrite intellectual engagement in every corner of the university, including the so-called “hard” sciences like chemistry, physics, and medicine.

The advent of critical theory is arguably the single most profound influence on study in the humanities in recent times. And as scholars such as Brian Stock and, most recently, Bruce Holsinger have recognized, study of the earliest periods of European culture has in many ways been at the heart of this contemporary phenomenon. Not only were a number of the intellectual founders of contemporary theory themselves medievalists, or were influenced by their readings of medieval texts, but scholars of the Middle Ages have been active in dismantling the strictures of Enlightenment progressivism by insisting that the medieval period is apt to any
theoretically charged discussion. Perhaps more importantly, the interdisciplinarity that grounds medieval studies has long questioned both the practicality of firm boundaries between history, literature, and culture and the claims to novelty of post-Enlightenment thought. Medievalists have thus been quick to point out the ways in which postmodern critique, while espousing an anti-teleological rhetoric, has nonetheless replicated a teleology in its own practice, concentrating primarily on the modern and the contemporary while attributing transparency and homogeneity to earlier periods.

Anglo-Saxon studies is no exception to this trend, despite being somewhat less shaken by the initial tremors of intellectual upheaval than other areas of humanistic inquiry. By the early 1990s, Anglo-Saxonists such as Allen Frantzen, Gillian Overing, Roy Liuzza, and Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe had begun to hail both the importance and the influence of critical theory. The focus on language and material artifacts that is central to any work on Anglo-Saxon England resonates, in many ways, with the linguistic turn of contemporary theory as well as its expansive notion of textuality. And Anglo-Saxon studies, perhaps more than any other subset of medieval studies, was grounded in interdisciplinarity from its inception, despite its primary basis in text; because of the fragmentary nature of the documentary evidence, readings of Anglo-Saxon texts have always depended heavily on evidence from adjacent fields, such as archaeology, history, theology, art history, medicine, and folklore. In general, however, critical theory has impacted Anglo-Saxon studies in ways that are more subtle than the high-theory engagements of literary studies in the 1980s and 1990s. The discipline as a whole accepts the constructed nature of both knowledge and the objects of study: we recognize that there are no a priori Anglo-Saxon artifacts until we name them as such; we acknowledge that our own modern interests and personal biases will find their way into our academic enterprises; and we reflect on how these contingencies affect our search for a deeper understanding of the time and place we have designated as “Anglo-Saxon.” Over time, the basic premises of the critical theory movement have worked their way into Anglo-Saxon studies, and the last two decades have seen ample evidence of work being done within a wide variety of theoretical frameworks, from psychoanalytic and postcolonial readings of Beowulf to feminist analyses of archaeological sites and poststructuralist critiques of the illustrations in the Old English Hexateuch.

Despite recent declarations of the “death of theory,” scholarly inquiry remains forever altered by the critical theory paradigm. As Terry Eagleton writes, “There can be no going back to an age when it was enough to pronounce Keats delectable or Milton a doughty spirit . . . If theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever” (1–2). Yet, as Eagleton’s emphasis on “reflection” suggests, and as Horkheimer’s manifesto clearly stated, the purpose of a critical engagement is not simply to “do theory.” In order to be a true critical theory, an intellectual engagement must alter that with which it engages; neither the object of study nor the methodological framework emerges from the encounter exactly as it began. Here, too, Anglo-Saxonists have been active in reframing many of the basic assumptions of humanistic study through their own
work. Just one case in point is Martin Foys’ 2007 study of representational practices in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, *Virtually Anglo-Saxon*. Foys uses theoretical insights drawn from the study of new media to think about how the material practices of reading shape the possibility of interpretation. His resulting conclusions address not only how medieval readers would have interacted differently with manuscripts than modern readers do with print materials, but also how medieval reading practices can help us to understand our own engagement with information in the digital formats of the modern age. Such work is a salutary example of how medieval studies has the potential to talk back to the modern theoretical discourses that are brought to bear upon it. And that is the purpose of the essays in this volume.

The goal of our *Handbook* thus differs significantly from Byrhtferth’s stated goals in his *Enchiridion*. We do not aspire simply to initiate students in a particular theoretical language, nor do we intend to introduce them to the wide variety of methodologies currently practiced in the field of Anglo-Saxon studies, although we do hope that this volume offers such an introduction. Nor do we set out to argue that theoretical models like postcolonialism or Marxism can be valuable tools in the investigation of the Anglo-Saxon world. Such goals would imply that theory and Anglo-Saxon studies continue to be two languages, and our experience and the essays contained in this volume demonstrate unequivocally that this is no longer the case. Instead, we set out to do what Byrhtferth himself accomplishes, if only implicitly: to open up a space for a “more spacious” conversation about what constitutes Anglo-Saxon studies, its practices, and its relationship to the wider universe of academic inquiry.

Following the model of works such as Raymond Williams’s *Keywords* and Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin’s *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, the volume is organized around a set of key terms of great currency in recent critical discourse, such as “race and ethnicity,” “gender,” and “disability.” Also like these earlier studies, this collection is intended to disarticulate these terms from their accepted positions within the scholarly vocabulary and to make visible those structures of understanding that buttress their current importance. Unlike these earlier works, however, this volume approaches this disarticulation by posing the question of how useful and relevant these terms are for the practice of Anglo-Saxon studies. Each contributor not only examines the critical history of his or her chosen term but also considers to what degree the term has been, or even should be, taken up in the study of Anglo-Saxon language and culture. Have alternate and specialized terms been used with the same sense as these more generalized critical terms? What would the work of Anglo-Saxon studies look like were it reconfigured around these terms? And, importantly, what could the practice of Anglo-Saxon studies reveal about the current use of these terms in general scholarly discourse?

Any volume organized in this way is obviously open to question and critique about the reasons for including each term and for excluding others. Early in the process we decided that the most productive method of selecting terms would be to draw a balance between our own ideas and those proposed to us by our contributors. By discussing a range of possible terms with each scholar represented here,
before coming to a mutual decision about which would be covered, we have attempted to ensure that this volume not only considers a fair slice of critical vocabulary but also reflects those terms currently being taken up within the discourse of Anglo-Saxon studies. Important also is the interdisciplinary nature of this volume, with archaeologists, art historians, and historians contributing alongside those from literature departments. Of course, any shortlist of critical terms will contain notable omissions, and this collection is no exception. In defense of its form we echo Byrhtferth: this is a volume intended to contain “manega þing,” rather than everything. Above all, it is intended to serve as a starting point for further inquiry. While aiming both to introduce students to the discourse of the discipline and to provide more advanced scholars with food for thought, its overarching goal is to foster discussion among all those who investigate Anglo-Saxon England about the stakes of our interest in this period and about potential directions for the field, and in that, it looks as much to the future as it does to the past.

References


To write about borders in Early England already indicates the creation of a metanarrative of confinement – an essay neatly limited by its topic. However, “borders” in Anglo-Saxon England and into the twelfth century are as complex and messy as any of our modern boundaries. “Borders” can refer to geographically, politically, and religiously defined areas, landmarks both natural and man-made, individual nations, races, regions, languages, demarcations of land ownership, entire chronological periods, the limits of knowledge and cultural influences, the defining of texts and genres, the acceptability and policing of the orthodox, and the censuring and punishment of the heterodox. “Borders” also intimate distance and distinction, or throw into sharp relief proximity and similarity – a blurring of boundaries. Thus, what appears to be a relatively straightforward term is immensely tricky, and particularly so within the bounded length of an essay like this. Here, then, Early English terminology for “borders” will be discussed, with a particular and recurring emphasis on mearcian (“to mark,” “to mark out”) and its various compounds and derivatives; and the way land was mapped and divided up will be briefly investigated through Anglo-Saxon charters. Most time will be spent on the in-between, though, in an effort to understand how the Anglo-Saxons might have conceived of the land between borders, those spaces which one might think of in postcolonial terms as “liminal,” on the threshold of that which is on the other side, but which one might also think of as being neither one thing nor the other; or, indeed, paradoxically, looking both ways simultaneously. Since borders or boundaries invoke all these complexities, I shall be treating literal boundaries and border regions within a range of Old English works, to allow multiple readings to emerge while resisting oversimplistic definition or predetermined categorization.
Border Theory has as its champions scholars whose focus is principally modern, and often centered on contemporary America and its borders with Hispanic Central America. Gloria Anzaldua’s seminal work, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, first published in 1987, describes the United States–Mexico border as a site “where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country – a border culture” (25). This “border culture,” a space of the in-between, is akin to the hybridity of postcolonial theory, where the hybrid is created as a destabilizing identity emerging from the contested space between colonizer and colonized. Some scholars imagine an assimilative impulse evolving from the hybrid; this implies that hybridity equates to syncretism or fusion, but this is to oversimplify the complex, processual, and separate state-of-being created in the contested space. In relation to the border, this is a space that cleaves, and thus emerges as “in-between” and mediating adjacent boundaries.1 Ironically, of course, the present essay concerns itself with a period labeled the “medieval,” the “middle ages,” an often derogatory term that implies transition from one (good) thing to another; the “middle” is the “dark,” the empty, the lacuna delimited by the edges of the defined. This fallacy of the boundary (whether chronological, political, or linguistic) is highlighted by Iain Chambers’s sensitive work on the Mediterranean, in which he describes the border as “not a thing, but rather, the materialization of authority,” reminding us that “the seeming solidity of the lands, languages, and lineages that border and extend outward from [the Mediterranean’s] shores . . . become an accessory to its fluid centrality” (6, 27). It is this “fluid centrality,” the “in-betweenness,” that might prove most productive for the purposes of this examination of borders in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Translating Meaning

It is always best to begin with clarifying the labels that we use, themselves indicative of the way in which language potentially closes off interpretation, especially when we are required to translate an ancient form of a language into its modern approximation. For the Anglo-Saxons, the word “border” itself did not exist, since it is a French loan (though its semantic range might have been influenced by Old English *bord*); neither did the words “frontier,” “limit,” “territory,” and “genre” exist in English prior to the fifteenth century and later. The Anglo-Saxons used instead a multitude of words to express the concept of the boundary or demarcation of land or nation. One such term is *bord* – itself a polysemic word – meaning “boundary,” particularly when used with prepositions *innan* and *utan* denoting place (“within” and “outside” of boundaries). The most famous use of this concept of a boundary denoting a geographic and political unit is found in the late ninth-century work, King Alfred’s Preface to Gregory’s *Pastoral Care*, one of the best known and most widely taught texts from the period (Treharne 14–15). In his lament on the state of education in England following the Viking incursions
throughout the ninth century, Alfred looks back to a time when there were far greater numbers of learned men and successful leaders in the country. He comments on how previous kings in Anglo-Saxon England

ægðer ge hiora sibbe ge hiora siodu ge hiora onweald innanbordes gehioldon, ond eac ut hiora edel ryndon; ond hu him ða speow ægðer ge mid wige ge mid wisdome; ond eac ða godcundan hadas, hu giorne hie wæron ægðer ge ðymb lare ge ðymb liornunga, ge ðymb ealle ða ðiwowotdomas ðe hie Gode don scoldon; ond hu man utanbordes wisdom ond lare hieder on lond sohte; ond hu we hie nu sceoldon ute begietan, gif we hie habban sceoldon. Swæ claene hio wæs oðfeallenu on Angelcynne ðat swiðe feawa wæron behionan Humbre ðe hiora ðeninga cuðen understondan on Englisc oðde furðum an ærendgewrit of Laðene on Englisc arececean; ond Ic wene ðætte noht monige begiondan Humbre næren. Swæ feawa hiora wæron ðæt Ic furðum anne anlepne ne mæg geðencean be suðan Temese ða ða ða to rice feng.

(both maintained their peace and their morality and their authority within their borders, and also enlarged their territory outside; and how they prospered both in warfare and in wisdom; and also how zealous the sacred orders were both about teaching and about learning as well as all the services that they had to perform for God; and how people from outside the borders came here to this country in search of knowledge and instruction, and how we should now have to get them from outside, if we should acquire them. So complete was learning’s decay among the English people that there were very few this side of the Humber who could understand their services in English, or even translate a letter from Latin into English; and I imagine that there were not many beyond the Humber. There were so few of them that I cannot even remember a single one south of the Thames when I succeeded to the kingdom.)

This self-positioning of kingdom, nation and self by Alfred is very revealing for its understanding of discrete and permeable boundaries, political and intellectual roles. In his rhetorical pairings of morality, authority and wisdom within borders (that is, “at home”) with expansionism and warfare outside borders (that is, “abroad”), he contrasts previous stable reigns with his own, where outsiders are now required to bring knowledge to the English that was once sought by foreigners within England’s borders.

Moreover, even the situation among the English nation itself is not so straightforward, since natural boundaries – the Humber and Thames rivers in the north and south of eastern England – preclude the provision of an overarching statement, accurately reflecting the divisions of earlier kingdoms in the period preceding Alfred’s reign. North of the Humber was the Northumbrian kingdom, and the Thames signaled the boundary between the kingdoms of Kent and Essex; these political borders clearly still meant something to Alfred and his audience, as did the chronology of reigns and the limits of remembrance. When Alfred tells us that he cannot remember a single learned man south of the Thames when he
ascended to the throne, he points to the edges of cultural understanding in this
period of transitional literacy – the fraying of knowledge outside the bounds of
time and memory. Here, then, the political and geographical boundaries are
paralleled with the limits of learning, as if a river can signal the gulf between levels
of intellectual prowess, in a way reminiscent of the current stereotypes common
to the British (or, indeed, American) north–south divide. Even from this single
text, then, the complexity of the border – a natural landmark, a politically
authorized divide, an intellectual boundary, an intangible marker of difference –
becomes clear.

**Traces of the Past**

Alfred’s remembering of past glories illustrates the importance of memory in
configuring history. To combat a reliance on the oral, a dependency on the
memories of generations, written records became increasingly important as the
Anglo-Saxon centuries from c.500 to c.1100 progressed and the Anglo-Saxon
became transformed into the Anglo-Norman state. Although Alfred was not the
first English king to recognize the significance of writing (the sixth-century
king of Kent, Ine, initiated the recording of law), he was the first volitionally
to determine a program of vernacular textualization: the committal of essential
historical and pastoral works to a form intelligible to those with a degree of
education. In this, he, and his advisors, sought to shore up the foundations of
the English nation, to create a sense of continuity that razed the barriers imposed
by time with its dissipation of cultural recollection. The recording of land
ownership – its tenure, its bequest, and its inheritance – was thus of great
importance in the long Anglo-Saxon era, as it is with any emerging nation, since
land ownership and its public recognition determine any nation’s future wealth
and political direction. The ways in which land came to be parceled up publicly
can be examined through the records of land conveyancing, a number of which
precede Alfred’s reign from 871 to 899. These records both reflected the
development of Anglo-Saxon communities and contributed to the forging of
those communal enterprises. They also permit an understanding of the fixity
of the boundaries of land, and of how the Anglo-Saxons perceived their
surroundings.

In two ninth-century charters, or grants of land or property, known as Sawyer
265 and 175, the king is witnessed granting land for ecclesiastical use – for the
minster of St Peter’s, Bath in the first case, and to the archbishop in the second
(Sawyer). Charters or diplomas, issued in Latin, usually include boundary clauses
outlining the precise demarcation of land granted; interestingly, these boundary
clauses are often written in Old English, and sometimes made the more visible,
the more separate, by the provision of increased space before and after them in the
manuscript (see Thompson). It seems obvious enough that the details of the
parcel of land confirmed by the charter should be in the language of the land and
local people, particularly since the landscape in medieval England is itself revealed through the names of particular topographical and visual features, such as Thorndon, which means “thorn-tree hill” or Bristol (brycg + stow), “meeting place by the bridge.”²

In Sawyer 265, for example, dated to 808 CE, the Saxon king Cynewulf some fifty years earlier is recorded as the donor of five hides of land in North Stoke, Somerset to St Peter’s in Bath. After laying out the conditions under which the land is to be held, and listing the eighteen witnesses, the extent of the donation is made explicit in Old English:

> Et hæc sunt territoria. Ærest of Swinforda upp andlang broces to ceolnes wyllan, andlang hege ræwe to luttes crundele, þanon to grafes owisce, andlang owisce to wege, andlang wesges to ælesbeorge, nyber on alercumb, andlang alercumbes ut on Afene, andlang Afene þæt eft on Swinford.

(And these are the lands. First from Swineford up along the brook to Ceolnes wellspring; along the hedgerow to Luttes mound; from there to the edge of the grove; along the edge to the pathway; along the pathway to Æles hill; down to the alder valley; along alder valley to the Avon; along the Avon again to Swineford.) (Kelly)

The detail of this boundary clause allows historians and archaeologists to trace the landscape not simply notionally but in reality,³ to trace the landmarks that create natural borders (valleys, escarpments, groves, and copses) and man-made dividers (hedgerows, pathways, barrows, and burial mounds). There are, however, no cardinal directions in this sequence of clauses, and one can only move “along,” “up,” and “down,” illustrating a way in which the Anglo-Saxons orientated themselves and perceived their place in relation to the world around them contingent upon specific local landmarks.⁴

Boundary clauses provide us with a great deal of evidence for the vocabulary of continuity and division, expanse and containment in the physical world. In a charter of Cnut (S950) to Archbishop Ælfstan, made in 1018 at the request of Cnut’s queen, the king grants a copse (Hæseleresc or Hazelhurst) with the following boundary:

> Þis syndan dæs dennes landgemær to Hæseleresc. Ærest andlang fearnleges burnan oð Runanleages mearce; of Runanleages mearce be Holanbeames mearce; of Holanbeames mearce swa on gerihtte to Wiglege, bufan dære smiðdan to þam geate; of þam geate innan þæne sihter; andland sihtres innan þæne bradan burnan; niðer andland bradan burnan be þæs arcebisceopes mearce eft innan fearnleages burnan.

(These are the boundaries of the copse at Hazelhurst. First along the fern-wood brook to Rowley’s boundary; from Rowley’s boundary along Holbeam’s boundary; from Holbeam’s boundary direct to Whiligh, above the smithy to the gate; from the gate into the drain, along the drain into the broad brook; down along the broad brook by the archbishop’s boundary back into the fern-wood brook.) (Brooks and Kelly)
In this sequence of clauses, it is clear that multiple ancient boundaries are already in place in the Sussex area to which the grant refers; the parceling of land is precisely measured by ownership borders that already exist, and the way one understands the delimited area is dependent on one’s knowledge of the land. The copse that Cnut is granting in this charter is bounded by land already owned, but which set of boundaries came first? Was Cnut’s copse the “in-between”? The leftovers? Or was the copse a royal possession, and other land was divided up against it? Either way, the obvious implication of these charters is the productivity, the potential usefulness of the land in-between the landmarks. Of interest here, too, though, are the terms used to denote the divisions and borders which seem rather less productive than prohibitive: landgemære, a compound of “land” and gemære meaning “limit,” “end,” “boundary,” suggesting a point beyond which one cannot go forward. Such is the meaning of the term in the Old English translations of the Psalms and Bede’s Ecclesiastical History, where gemæro renders terminos and on . . . gemære, in confinio (Bosworth and Toller).

Mark My Words

Denoting “boundary” or “border” for the Anglo-Saxons, and still in use today, is the noun mearc, used repetitively in the charter quotation above. Mearc exists as a simplex, but is also found in a multitude of compound words (Bosworth and Toller). Interestingly, it is from the same root as the homonym mearc (“mark”), and more on this will be said below. Many of the uses of mearc occur in the specialist vocabulary describing the landscape for boundary clauses, though such words must surely have been in popular use to have meant anything related to delimitation of property within a legal context. Thus, for example, mearchlinc denotes a boundary ridge and is found in the modern place-name Marklinch (in Hampshire); similarly, a mearcweg is a boundary road. These terms all suggest a marker on the periphery, a feature that is on the edge of something between the viewer and the border. But mearc can also intimate a space that is more than the periphery of the unnamed center; mearc includes the “space marked out” – that is, the space in-between the marked. This is most obvious in the case of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia (a large part of which comprises the Midlands in present-day England), the name of which describes the Mierce, the “Marcher-people” or “borderers,” that is surely not those living adjacent to the border, but rather those living between borders, those in the middle of others’ edges (Yorke 19–20). This seems to be reinforced by the cases of mearcstapa (“border stepper”), mearcweard (literally, “a border warden,” usually translated as “wolf”), and mearcstede (“border land,” “desolate district”), where the initial noun in the compound takes on a somewhat sinister meaning.

Of these latter three terms, mearcstapa is the most familiar to scholars, since it is used to describe the character of Grendel, Hrothgar’s foe, in Beowulf. This mythical, monstrous cannibalistic figure (still said to this day to haunt the fenlands of East Anglia) is described as having the strength of fifty men, as being flame-eyed, as