Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word, War

Review Number: 2290

Publish date: Thursday, 25 October, 2018

Author: British Library

Date of Publication: 2018

Publisher: British Library

Publisher url: <https://www.bl.uk/events/anglo-saxon-kingdoms>

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Sara Charles

The British Library's new exhibition 'Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word, War' is a celebration of Anglo-Saxon culture and learning, mainly represented through the texts produced during that period. The education and skill of the Anglo-Saxons shines brightly, and the exhibition charts their development from their original Germanic roots through to the formation of the English state, all the while emphasizing their links with the Continent and the Christian world.

The first room acts as a brilliant introduction to the exhibition, setting the Anglo-Saxon culture as a fusion of Roman, Germanic and indigenous influences. It was particularly welcome to see such a mix of styles of writing, with ogham carvings on a knife handle, runic carvings on a cremation urn, uncial script in the St Augustine gospels and insular minuscule in a copy of [Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*](#) [2]. Also featured was the [Textus Roffensis](#) [3], a law-code that is the earliest evidence of the English language, compiled c. 600.

What is so inspiring about this exhibition is that the Anglo-Saxons are in no way 'sandwiched' between the Romans and the Vikings, it is a celebration of the Anglo-Saxon culture and their connections with the wider world. Particularly of note was the North African manuscript of the [Letters of Cyprian](#) [4] dating from the fourth century, but in England by the eighth century. It is possible that abbot Hadrian could have brought over with him when he was sent to Canterbury in 669 – once again highlighting how widespread Christian connections were in this period.

The treasures on display in the second room alone could have been an exhibition just in itself. For book historians, this was a truly overwhelming experience. The [Book of Durrow](#) [5] and the [Echternach Gospels](#) [6] displayed side by side is a wonder to behold. The intricacies of the decorated initial in the Book of Durrow, and the glowing yellow of the lion symbol of Mark in the Echternach gospels is absolutely breathtaking. These images will be so familiar to so many people with the advances that have been made in digital technology, yet nothing beats the real-life experience of seeing them with your own eyes, and all in the same room together. It is to the exhibition's credit that I was so absorbed in seeing these examples of early Anglo-Saxon book design that it took me a while to realize the [Codex Amiatinus](#) [7] was sitting quietly and magnificently in a huge display case at the back of the room. Back in England after leaving for Rome over 1,300 years ago, at 49 cm high this bible written in uncial script stands as a monument to the book production skill of the Northumbrian monks. In contrast to this, the [St Cuthbert Gospel](#) [8] sitting to the left of the Codex Amiatinus seems tiny in comparison. It was displayed to show the wonderful corded binding, but it was a little disappointing not to be able to look inside. To my shame I almost walked past the Durham

and Lindesfarne gospels displayed together without noticing – that's how packed full of treasures this room is.

As if that wasn't enough, just before you go into the next room, two manuscripts are on display as an added bonus. The first, a [commentary on the Apocalypse](#) [9], contains marginalia by Boniface, an Anglo-Saxon missionary (d. 754) and Dunstan, archbishop of Canterbury (d. 988), which really brings home the heritage of Christianity in England. This book would have been important to Boniface, but must have been even more special to Dunstan, writing in the same pages as Boniface, by then revered as an English martyr for 200 years. And for us to see the two hands of important English figures in Christianity together adds an even greater layer. The second manuscript was the [calendar of Willibrord](#) [10], the Irish missionary. Also containing a pseudo-Hieronymian martyrology, the calendar is opened on the months of November and December, to show the hand of Willibrord in the the margin, but rather more delightfully, also shows the feastday of Hild, abbess of Whitby on 18 November, which is the only Anglo-Saxon calendar to have this entry.

The Mercian room again holds more iconic Anglo-Saxon treasures, such as the [Guthlac Roll](#) [11], the [St Chad Gospels](#) [12] and a [gold coin of Offa](#) [13] featuring Islamic design, again highlighting the trade links and cultural influences predominant in the Anglo-Saxon world. This room also contains many important charters and further highlights the Continental connections important in this period, showing the mix of Frankish and Insular book design, particularly in the [Harley Golden Gospels](#) [14].

Moving onto to the rise of the West Saxons, the [Stockholm Codex Aureus](#) [15] was displayed to full effect, with its gold shining magnificently, and purple pages providing a striking visual contrast. However, much more endearing is the inscription above and below the illuminated lettering on the *Chi Rho* page, describing how Ealdorman Ælfred and his wife Werberg gave the book to Christ Church, Canterbury after it had been ransomed from a Viking army. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle makes its first appearance in this room, with [Manuscript A](#) [16] opened at the folio recording Alfred's accession to king of the West Saxon's. Alongside it is the only surviving version of Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, copied by a sixteenth-century scribe before the Anglo-Saxon manuscript was destroyed in the 1731 fire at Ashburnham house. There are also other manuscripts on display that just about survived the fire, such as the [Otho-Corpus Gospels](#) [17], which serve as a timely reminder of the fragility of the texts, but also highlights just how amazing it is what has survived intact to the present day.

Moving further into this room, you suddenly become aware of the Ruthwell cross looming silently over everything, with its Christian imagery and Latin and runic inscriptions, representing a fusion of Northumbrian and Roman culture. The quadrupal whammy of [Beowulf](#) [18], the [Vercelli Book](#) [19], the [Exeter Book](#) [20] and the [Junius Manuscript](#) [21] will be a must-see for English literature scholars, showing Old English verse at its finest. The section on science, technology and medicine was also well displayed, underlining the fact that Anglo-Saxons understood far more about the workings of the universe than is often thought.

The only thing I think the exhibition lacked was the development of the script. There could have been a great section showing the development from pain-staking Roman [Uncial](#) [22] to the quicker [Insular Minuscule](#) [23] (probably developed at the Northumbrian monasteries to cope with the Continental demand for Bede's texts), followed by [Caroline Minuscule](#) [24] which Alcuin helped to develop at Charlemagne's court. All of these elements were represented through the exhibition, it's just a shame those threads could not have been drawn together in one display room - although the catalogue does go into more detail on each individual item. Also, the room showing Art in the Kingdom of England did show the development of artistic styles, and the audio-visual guide by [Patricia Lovett](#) [25] on making manuscripts was a brilliant practical element. The [Judith of Flanders Gospels](#) [26] on display stands as a great example, not just of a sumptuous jewelled binding, but of female book ownership. I was surprised not to see the [Utrecht Psalter](#) [27] and [Harley Psalter](#) [28] in this room, with their beautiful pen illustrations of the psalms, but perhaps this was down to the logistics of the room.

The last few rooms of the exhibition deal unavoidably with the shift of the Anglo-Saxon world to a Viking king Cnut, and then Norman king William. It finishes (almost) with the Domesday book, but the final display is that of the Utrecht, Harley and [Eadwine](#) [29] Psalters. They are shown together in a triptych to illustrate the influences and connections of England and the Continent before and after the conquest, which ends the exhibition on a good note.

This exhibition wonderfully encapsulates the Anglo-Saxon world, demonstrating their mastery of design, language, statecraft and foreign relations. The intricate patterns on the goldwork, the elaborate decoration on the manuscripts, and the poetry and riddles in their language all highlight a culture that was innovative, adaptive and highly sophisticated, and proves once more that the Anglo-Saxon world was far from a cultural backwater. This exhibition must have taken a huge amount of planning and co-ordination, but the British Library has succeeded in creating such an important reflection of Anglo-Saxon society that it really will live on in people's memories.

['Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word, War'](#) [30] runs until Tuesday 19 February 2019 at the British Library.

Other reviews:

Evening Standard

<https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/arts/anglo-saxon-kingdoms-british-library-review-a3965181.html> [31]

Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/21/anglo-saxon-kingdoms-review-barbaric-splendour-and-fierce-vision> [32]

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2290>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/300804> [2] <https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-KK-00005-00016>

[3] <https://www.rochestercathedral.org/textus-online/>

[4]

<https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=8341&CollID=27&NStart=40165>

[5] https://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/#folder_id=1845&pidtopage=MS57_001&entry_point=1

[6] <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b530193948/f1.item.zoom>

[7] <http://mss.bmlonline.it/s.aspx?Id=AWOS3h2-I1A4r7GxMdaR#/book>

[8]

https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_89000&_ga=2.74037266.1095124747.1540139885004238.1504296075

[9]

<https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/inquire/Discover/Search/#/?p=c+0,t+,rsrs+0,rsps+10,fa+,so+ox%3A%5Easc,sci%4da9-4887-aba7-88e64ca624d4,vi+e20e0b27-50b1-4bae-a1ef-cbe448ac89d0>

[10] <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6001113z/f2.item.zoom> [11] <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/guthlac-roll>

[12] <https://www.lichfield-cathedral.org/downloads/st-chad-gospels.pdf>
 [13] http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1093298&pa
 [14] http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=harley_ms_2788
 [15] <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/17185/> [16] <https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/wp146tq7625>
 [17] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otho-Corpus_Gospels#/media/File:CottonCorpusGospelFragFol27r.jpg
 [18] <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/beowulf> [19] <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/vercelli-book>
 [20] <https://www.exeter-cathedral.org.uk/history-heritage/cathedral-treasures/exeter-book/>
 [21] <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/junius-manuscript>
 [22] <https://port.sas.ac.uk/mod/book/view.php?id=891&chapterid=501>
 [23] <https://port.sas.ac.uk/mod/book/view.php?id=1121&chapterid=653>
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 [27] <http://utrechtshalter.nl> [28] http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_603
 [29] <http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/james/viewpage.php?index=1229> [30] <https://www.bl.uk/events/anglo-saxon-kingdoms> [31] <https://www.standard.co.uk/go/london/arts/anglo-saxon-kingdoms-british-library-review-a3965181.html>
 [32] <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/21/anglo-saxon-kingdoms-review-barbaric-splendour-and-fierce-vision>