Note

1. A course on Old Norse for beginners is available at http://www.hi.is/~haukurth/norse.

2 Recognising Old English Words

It is likely that one of the biggest obstacles readers encounter when tackling Old English texts is the apparent unfamiliarity of the vocabulary. First of all, the spellings of many words have changed – so even if a word has survived from Old English into today's English, it might not be immediately recognisable. An example is *cwēn* 'queen'. A further issue to do with spelling is that some of the letters that are used in the Old English alphabet are no longer used in today's English, so 'forth', for example, is spelled *forþ* or *forð*, and 'was' is spelled *wæs*. A greater hindrance is that many Old English words have disappeared entirely from our active vocabulary, and simply have to be learnt as you would learn a word in a foreign language. Three words for 'spear', for instance, were *gār*, *ord* and *spere*. The third has survived, but the others have not. Finally, even if you do recognise a word and think you understand it, you might find that over the centuries the meaning of the word has shifted. An example of this is *dēor*, which in Old English means any wild animal, but in today's English means only one kind, a 'deer'.

This chapter aims to help you over the first hurdles by introducing you to some useful and quickly identifiable Old English words, and suggesting some strategies with which you can begin to build up your own 'word hoard' (Old English *wordhord*) of ancient expressions. With the minimum of effort, many Old English words are easy to recognise. They have not changed very much for over a thousand years. For instance, most if not all of the following words should be recognisable (their present-day equivalences are given at the end of this chapter). It often helps to say the words aloud.

and	*ēast*	*gold*	*help*	*blis*
god	*west*	*understandan*	*word*	*wundor*[1]

As you read through many of the texts given later in this book, therefore, some phrases here and there will be relatively easy to understand. Here are some examples, adapted from texts we shall encounter:

Cyneheard wæs Sigebryhtes brōþor.	Cyneheard was Sigebryht's brother.
Crist wæs on rōde.	Christ was on the cross ('rood').
Þæt wæs God æl-mihtig.	That was God almighty.
Hē fēoll on eorþan.	He fell to the ground ('earth').
Hit wæs ne riht.	It was not right.
Ic hæfde twā honda and twēgen fēt.	I had two hands and two feet.
Mīn tunge is heard.	My tongue is harsh ('hard').

It is not surprising that words for such basic concepts as relationships and parts of the body remain fairly stable in the language. Our task as language learners is to build on this shared vocabulary and to try to internalise the vocabulary that has been lost.

The Old English alphabet

One of the most noticeable characteristics of the Old English alphabet is that not all of its letters have survived into today's English. There are two extra consonants, *þ* and ð, which both represent the sounds now shown as *th*, whether voiced as in '*th*is' or unvoiced as in '*th*ing'. Occasionally, voiced *th* becomes pronounced as *d*. Knowing this, then, can you recognise the following words?

dēað *þing* *þis* *norþ*

morþor *ōðer* *brōðor* *eorðe*[2]

In later chapters of this book, you will find some words spelled with both *þ* and ð in different texts, and even within a single text. This reflects the variation in spellings in manuscripts of Old English. In Chapters 2–5, we have standardised the spellings somewhat in order to ease the initial encounter with the language, so here occurrences of ð have been regularised to *þ*.

There is one extra vowel character in the Old English alphabet: *æ* was pronounced *a* as in *cat*. It can be found in the following words:

æfter *æt* *wæter* (compare today's broad Scots pronunciation, 'watter')

Missing letters

Although the Old English alphabet contains a few extra letters, it does not use all the letters we are familiar with in today's English. There are some modern letters that are rarely if ever used in Old English:

Present-day English	Old English
k	c
v	f
z	s

Knowing this, the following Old English words should be a little more recognisable:

dēofol *drinc* *dysig* *folc* *ofer* *weorc*[3]

Switched sounds

A common change in English over a thousand years is caused by people's habit of changing sounds around, for example saying *modren* rather than *modern*. This switching of sounds, technically known as 'metathesis', often happens with *r* but occurs with other sounds too. This is why modern English has *third* and *thirty* alongside *three*: all originally began with *thr-*. Can you recognise the following words?

beorht *gærs* *þrēo* *þridda* *þrītig* *þurh*[4]

Changes in spelling and pronunciation

Over time, many Old English words changed their pronunciation (and spelling) in a regular way – so regular, in fact, that once you can identify the change, you can often identify the word.

Combinations of consonants are often easy to recognise:

Old English	*OE Example*	*Present-day English*	*PDE Example*
cw	*cwic*	qu	quick (i.e. 'alive')
sc	*biscop*	sh	bishop
hl and hr	*hlaford, hrōf*	l and r	lord, roof
hw	*hwǣr*	wh	where
ht	*niht*	ght	night

There are no 'silent' letters in Old English: all vowels and consonants are pronounced. Silent letters in today's English, such as 'gh' in 'night' and 'k' in 'knee', often represent sounds that were pronounced in Old English and have now become fossilised in the spelling system. Can you guess what these words might mean?

cwæð *scip* *æsc* *hlēapan* *hring*

hrefn *hwæt* *riht* *miht*[5]

It is also useful to learn some of the common changes that occur to 'long vowels', those vowels that are usually marked with a ¯ over the letter (as in ī, ū and so on):

wīf (pronounced something like 'weef') becomes 'wife'.
hūs (pronounced something like Scots 'hoose') becomes 'house'.
bāt (pronounced something like 'baht') becomes 'boat'.
tōþ (pronounced something like 'toth') becomes 'tooth'.
fēt (pronounced something like 'fate') becomes 'feet'.
brȳd (pronounced something like 'brüd', with the same vowel as in German *Füße*) becomes 'bride'; however, sometimes the vowel is shortened, so that *lȳtel* becomes 'little'.

Bearing these changes in mind, what do you think the following words mean?

wīf	*līf*	*mīl*	*hwīt*	*wīs*
hūs	*mūs*	*hlūd*	*sūþ*	*mūþ*
bāt	*hām*	*stān*	*bān*	*hlāf*
tōþ	*hrōf*	*stōd*	*blōd*	*bōc*
fēt	*hēr*	*hē*	*swēte*	*gēs*[6]

And how do you think the following words would look in Old English?

mine wine why good foot out town rope teeth[7]

Two tricky consonants

Some sounds are a little more complicated. The consonants *c* and *g* are pronounced differently in different positions and in different combinations of letters:

Old English *c* was usually pronounced *k* as in 'king'. However, before *e* and *i*, and at the end of a word, it can be pronounced *ch* as in 'chill'.

Old English *g* was usually pronounced as in 'girl'. However, before *e* and *i*, and at the end of a word, it can be pronounced like the *y* in 'yet'.

The combination *cg* was pronounced *j* as in 'judge'.

Knowing this, can you recognise the following expressions?

æl-mihtig	*benc*	*bysig*	*cræftig*	*dæg*
candel	*cirice*	*fæger*	*geong*	*manig*
ecg	*hālig*	*wērig*	*gēar*	*weg*[8]

Spelling variations

Some Old English words have a range of spellings, only one of which survives into today's English. For instance, some varieties of Old English have *a* where others have *o*, particularly before *m* or *n*, so that some texts have *ond* and *hond* rather than the more familiar *and* and *hand*. There is also variation between *a* and *ea*, particularly before *l*: for instance, the word for 'old' may be spelled *ald* or *eald*, and *fela* 'many' can also be spelled *feala*. Can you recognise the following words?

eall *fram* *mon* *strang* *lond* *lang* *weall*[9]

Changes in meaning

Sometimes, unfortunately, it is not enough simply to recognise a word. Sometimes its meaning has changed over the centuries. For example, two Old English words that could simply mean 'woman' were *cwēn* and *wīf*. Only their narrower meanings 'queen' and 'wife' (= 'married woman') survive in current standard English, although in some varieties, such as that of north-eastern Scotland, 'quine' still means a young woman more generally. Can you figure out the present-day meanings of the following Old English words? The first one is done for you.

Old English form	*Present-day English form*	*Old English meaning*
ǣrænde	errand	any kind of message
cræftig		skilful
dōm		judgement
gāst		spirit
sōna		immediately
winter		year[10]

100 Old English words you already know

One message of this chapter is that there are many Old English words that quickly become recognisable, especially once you take into consideration the changes in spelling and pronunciation explained above. See how many of the following words you recognise. Some have already been given in the examples above. Verbs end in *-an*, for example *lufian* 'to love'.

People (*cynn*)

bearn, brōþor, brȳd, cild, dohtor, fæder, frēond, mōdor, sunu, sweoster, widewe, wīf, wīfmann[11]

Professions (*cræft*)

scēap-hierde, fiscere, bæcere, cōc, smiþ, gold-smiþ, þēof, wrītere[12]

Animals and birds (*dēor and fugol*)

fisc, gōs, hors, mūs, oxa, scēap, wulf, wyrm[13]

6 Eighth-century helmet ('helm'), found at Coppergate, York

Food and drink (*mete and drinc*)

bēor, ealu, etan, hlāf, hungrig, hunig, medu, þurst, wæter[14]

Religion (*ǣ-fæst-nes*)

abbod, æl-mihtig, ærce-biscop, āþ, cirice, dēofol, engel, hālga, god, hǣþen, heofon, munuc, mynster, prēost, sāwol, scrīn[15]

War (*beadu*, *gūþ* or *hild*)

helm, sceaft, scyld, spere, swurd, wǣpen[16]

Time (*tīma*)

ǣfen-tīd, æfter, dæg, gēar, hwīl, mōnaþ, morgen, niht, nū, winter[17]

Numbers (*getæl*)

ān, twā, þrēo, fēower, fīf, siex, seofon, eahta, nigon, tīen, endleofan, twelf, twentig, þrītig, fēowertig, hund, þūsend[18]

To move (*āstyrian*)

ārisan, cuman, feallan, flēogan, gangan, hlēapan, rīdan, swimman[19]

To say and to write (*secgan and āwritan*)

andswarian, āscian, bōc, spell, word[20]

Compounds

Like present-day English, Old English tended to use compounds as a way of forming new words from existing ones. For instance, three words for 'hall' were *heall*, *reced* and *sele*. In the heroic society portrayed in much Old English poetry, the hall was the focal point for eating, drinking, and the distribution of wealth by the lord to his retainers. Hence we find compounds such as *dryht-sele* 'lord-hall', *gold-sele* 'gold-hall', *heall-þegn* 'hall-retainer', *wīn-reced* and *wīn-sele* 'wine-hall'. Similarly, words for 'battle', such as *beadu*, *gūþ*, *hild* and *wīg*, can combine with words for 'man' or 'warrior', such as *rinc*, to give compounds such as *gūþ-rinc* and *hilde-rinc* – both meaning 'man of battle; warrior' – and with *plega* 'play' or *rǣs* 'rush' to give compounds such as *beadu-rǣs* 'rush of battle', *gūþ-plega* and *wīg-plega* 'play of battle; conflict'. The following compounds all use vocabulary that we have already encountered. Can you work out what they mean?

dōm-dæg *medu-benc* *niht-weorc* *sǣ-man* *sǣ-rinc*[21]

Some useful words you should quickly learn

A small number of words occur many times in texts, and it is useful to learn and remember them, so that you do not have to look them up every time you come to read a new text. They are mainly grammatical words.

Questions		**Pronouns**	
hū	how	*ic*	I
hwā	who	*þū*	you (singular)
hwǣr	where	*hē*	he
hwæt	what	*hēo*	she
hwelc	which	*hit*	it
hwȳ	why	*wē*	we
		gē	you (plural)
		hīe	they, them

Question words and pronouns can be combined in a number of basic sentences, such as:

Hwā eart þū? *Hwæt dēst þū?* *Hwæt segst þū?*
Hwæt drincst þū? *Ne drincst þū wīn?* *Hwǣr slǣpst þū?*[22]

Two further small groups of grammatical words that occur frequently and are worth trying to memorise are conjunctions and common adverbs. Conjunctions link other words together, while adverbs often give information about time, frequency or manner (see further, Chapter 4). Some words, such as *þā* and *þonne*, can function as either conjunctions or adverbs, with slightly different meanings.

Conjunctions		**Adverbs**			
ac	but	*ǣr*	before	*oft*	often
for	before, because of	*ǣfre*	ever, always	*þā*	then
oþ-þæt	until	*ēac*	also	*þonne*	then
þā	when	*nū*	now		
þonne	when				

Learning unfamiliar vocabulary

The most effective way to learn vocabulary is to encounter it frequently, in different meaningful contexts. When learning a spoken language, like Arabic, Portuguese or Russian, there are opportunities to speak and hear the language in everyday conversations as well as to see it on the page. When learning languages that are no longer spoken, like Latin or Old English, we are normally restricted to reading texts, and so we meet particular words infrequently and in restricted contexts. If reading Old English is to become a pleasurable activity – which it should – then we have to make an effort to improve our reading fluency by enhancing our word-recognition skills. We have to make Old English vocabulary come alive.

The traditional way of engaging with an Old English text is to have a glossary (and perhaps an earlier translation) beside the original language, and to plough through each passage slowly, perhaps looking up most words in the glossary and comparing difficult passages with the translation. Generations of Old English scholars have been shaped by this process, and enthusiasts no doubt gain pleasure from the mental discipline required and the real sense of achievement when a particular work has been understood and appreciated. Readers with little earlier experience of learning another language perhaps need more support when approaching Old English for the first time, and the following advice is directed primarily at them.

Using dictionaries and glossaries

Dictionaries and glossaries are essential tools (and there is a good online dictionary of Old English at http://home.comcast.net/~modean52/oeme_dictionaries.htm). Many people plunder glossaries and dictionaries and make up their own list of useful vocabulary items, in a notebook or a computer file, and revise it periodically. This kind of activity is useful but it is best done systematically with frequent revision of the vocabulary, particularly in the early days. If you decide to make a vocabulary list, group the words according to their meanings, for example:

Parts of the body

bæc back
bān bone
blōd blood
cinn-bān chin bone
ēage eye
ēare ear
earm arm
eaxl shoulder
folme, hand, hond hand
fōt foot
hēafod head
heorte heart
līc body
mūþ mouth
nos-þyrel nostril
tōþ tooth
tunge tongue

As you build up your word-list, try to put aside a little time each day to review it. We can only internalise new words when we see them frequently, in different contexts and when they mean something to us. So use your imagination when you are memorising the words – visualise a huge, sharp *tōþ* in the *mūþ* of a creature whose *līc* is also large and misshapen. The more you make the words meaningful, the easier it should be to recall them when required.

The process of really getting to *know* what a word means is a slow one, and it cannot depend simply on looking the word up in a glossary or dictionary. To comprehend a word fully, we need to know various things, for example:

- What the word looks like; how it changes its form in different contexts, e.g. *þū* 'you' is sometimes found in the form *þē*. Why? (The answer will be revealed in Chapter 3.)
- What the word means – which involves not just knowing the dictionary sense of the word, but also knowing which words it is normally found alongside, what associations it might have (with family, or war), how it fits into a pattern of words with similar or opposite meaning, and so on.
- How the word behaves in combination with other words; that is, how it behaves grammatically.

We suggested above that the best way to learn individual items is to arrange them in meaningful groups (like 'parts of the body'), and to revise them frequently. When noting a word, it is useful to give more than just the bare dictionary meaning: give some useful grammatical information, and, ideally, show how it works in the text you have

been reading. In this way you will build up a fuller knowledge of the word, how it behaves in sentences, and what other words it is associated with. For example, there are various words in Old English to express the concept of 'battle', including *hild* and *gūþ*. In your notebook, under a section such as 'War' you might note the words as follows:

hild, f. war, battle Hē tō þǣre **hilde** stōp.
gūþ, f. war Hē ongan þā forþ beran gār to **gūþe.**

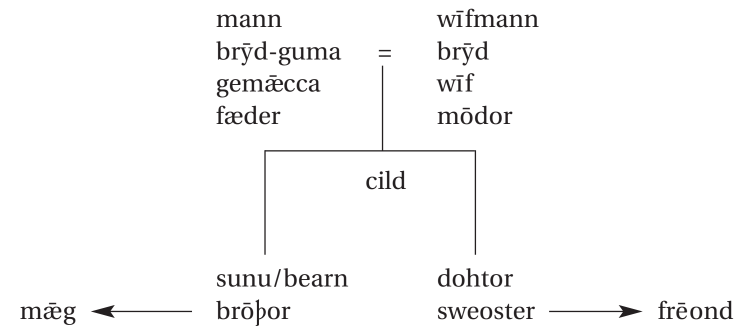
The example sentences used here are adapted very slightly from the opening lines of *The Battle of Maldon* (Text C), a poem which naturally uses a lot of words to do with war. The first example means 'He advanced to the battle', and the second means 'He began then to bear forth his spear to battle'.

Both *hild* and *gūþ* are nouns, and the *f.* shows that they are feminine. This affects the words around the noun; for example, *hilde* is preceded by the feminine form *þǣre* 'the', rather than the equivalent form *þǣm* 'the', which would be used if the noun were masculine (see Chapter 3 for further information on this topic). The example sentences also show that after a preposition like *tō* these nouns add an -*e* to their stem, *hilde* and *gūþe* (see Chapter 4 for more on this topic). Finally, the example sentences help us to begin to build up a network of words associated with battle, like *stōp* ('advanced') and *gār* ('spear').

Efficient readers gradually build up a set of familiar vocabulary items that they can quickly and easily recognise in texts. The more work you are prepared to put into actively developing your vocabulary, the greater the reward you will gain in increased reading speed and enjoyment. There are various strategies you can use to make vocabulary enrichment a more enjoyable process. A few examples are given below.

Using diagrams

A familiar way of grouping words expressing personal relationships is by a 'family tree'. The group of words denoting relatives can easily be expanded and shown in such a fashion:



By constructing a simple 'family tree' that here extends to *mǣg* 'relative' and *frēond* 'friend', we are forced to think about the relationship between the words used to express kinship in Anglo-Saxon times – which may not, of course, correspond to the ways in which modern society conceives of and expresses family relations.

Similar diagrams can be used to express concepts like social hierarchy and physical location. To take two examples:

1. How would you draw a map showing the following locations?

eorþe, folde	earth
middan-geard	middle-earth
heofon	heaven
hell	hell
rīce	kingdom
eard	homeland
sele	hall
hām	home
woruld	world
land	land
sǣ	sea

2. Old English has an abundance of vocabulary expressing degrees of social rank. Group the following words according to their position in the royal family, the nobility and the people who followed them.

aldor-mon, ealdor-man	nobleman, king's representative
æþeling	prince
beorn	man, warrior
ceorl	freeman, peasant ('churl')
cyning	king
cwēn	queen
dryhten	lord
ealdor	lord
eorl	nobleman, warrior
frēa	lord
hlāford	lord
rinc	warrior
þegn	warrior, retainer
þēoden	lord

Representing rank as a hierarchy, with royal family at the summit and retainers at the base, gives a visual sense of the Anglo-Saxon social order and encourages us to process the vocabulary used by the speakers themselves, a thousand years ago, to articulate their place in the community.

Affective vocabulary (emotion and evaluation)

Language teachers have long observed that learners quickly acquire those words that are personally meaningful to them. Into this category often fall those words that convey emotion or evaluations, for example, terms of praise and endearment, or insults and abuse. These are, in Old English, to do with the *mōd*, that is, the spirit or heart (it obviously gives us today's word 'mood'). In your developing word-list you can ask yourself which words you would apply to (a) the person you love, (b) your lord and master, and (c) the monster from the moorland who is terrorising your community. Possible expressions include:

lēof	dear	*æþele*	noble
grim	fierce, cruel	*frōd*	old, wise
ǣttren	poisonous	*mōdig*	spirited, daring
unearh	not cowardly, brave	*ælf-scīne*	beautiful (lit. elf-bright)
heard	hard, harsh	*cynelic*	royal

Of course, different people might wish to categorise these terms differently, depending on how they feel about monsters and masters. The point is to make these words – and the others you come across in this book – as meaningful to *you* as possible, so that you have a better chance of recalling them when you see them in reading passages.

Names

Old English personal names were made up of vocabulary words, often in compounds that do not make literal sense. The main characters in one of the texts we shall read in Part II are called Cynewulf and Cyneheard, names that translate as 'royal-wolf' and 'royal-hard'. The hero of the epic poem *Beowulf* has a name that literally means 'bee-wolf', but figuratively perhaps means 'bear' (bee = honey, wolf = fierce animal; fierce animal that steals honey = bear). This is an aspect of Old English on which J. R. R. Tolkien drew extensively when naming characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. For instance, the name of the villain, Saruman (Illustration 7), is taken from OE *searu* 'trickery' plus

7 Saruman from *Lord of the Rings*

'man', to give a compound with the sense of 'man of trickery'. Can you work out the meanings of the place-name Mordor, and the name of Tolkien's hobbit hero, Frodo?[23]

Summary

This chapter has reviewed some of the issues involved in recognising Old English words and their meanings, and offered advice on building up an active reading vocabulary. As anyone who has learned another language will know, knowledge of words alone is insufficient to understand texts. Readers also need to know how words behave in sentences and longer texts. In other words, readers need to experience how words combine into sentences and ultimately into stories, riddles and poems. The following three chapters turn to those basic aspects of Old English grammar that need to be understood in order to make sense of texts.

Answers

1 and, east, gold, help, bliss, god, west, understand, word, wonder
2 death, thing, this, north, murder, other, brother, earth
3 devil, drink, dizzy, folk, over, work
4 bright, grass, three, third, thirty, through
5 quoth (= said), ship, ash (= something made of ash-wood), leap, ring, raven, what, right, might (= power)
6 life, mile, white, wise; mouse, loud, south, mouth; home, stone, bone, loaf; roof, stood, blood (northern English pronunciation), book; here, he, sweet, geese
7 mīn, wīn, hwī or hwȳ, gōd, fōt, ūt, nū, tūn, rāp, tēþ
8 almighty, bench, busy, crafty, day, candle, church, fair, young, many, edge, holy, weary, year, way
9 all, from, man, strong, land, long, wall
10 crafty (= devious), doom, ghost, soon, winter (Old English *winter* can in fact mean either 'winter' or 'year')
11 child (Scottish 'bairn'), brother, bride, child, daughter, father, friend, mother, son, sister, widow, wife, woman
12 shepherd, fisher(man), baker, cook, smith, goldsmith, thief, writer
13 fish, goose, horse, mouse, ox, sheep, wolf, worm (= serpent)
14 beer, ale, eat, loaf, hungry, honey, mead, thirst, water
15 abbot, almighty, archbishop, oath, church, devil, angel, holy one (= saint), god, heathen, heaven, monk, minster (= monastery), priest, soul, shrine
16 helmet, shaft, shield, spear, sword, weapon
17 evening ('eventide'), after, day, year, while, month, morning, night, now, winter (= year)
18 one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, twenty, thirty, forty, hundred, thousand
19 arise, come, fall, fly, go (Scottish 'gang', also gangplank, gangway), leap, ride, swim
20 answer, ask, book, spell (= story, message), word (= speech)
21 Judgement Day, mead bench, night's work, sailor, sailor
22 Who are you? What do you do? What do you say? What do you drink? Don't you drink wine? Where do you sleep?
23 Mordor, the Land of Shadows = 'murder'; Frodo = old, wise

3 People and Things

This chapter continues to build up your basic reading skills in Old English. We start by considering what happens when we combine words in Old English; that is, we begin to explore the grammar of Old English. Old English grammar differs in a number of interesting ways from that of English today. In this chapter, in particular, we shall concentrate on the vocabulary and grammar used to express *people* and *things*.

Pronouns

One of the most common groups of words in Old English is the set of pronouns, that is, words such as

- *he*, which takes the place of full **masculine** noun phrases such as *the angel Gabriel*;
- *she*, which takes the place of **feminine** noun phrases like *the holy mother Mary*;
- *it*, which replaces **neuter** noun phrases, like *the child*.

In other words, rather than repeating 'the angel Gabriel' or 'Beowulf' in sentences like 'Beowulf leapt up. Beowulf killed the dragon,' we can use a pronoun to substitute for the second noun phrase: 'Beowulf leapt up. *He* killed the dragon.'

Pronouns are one of the few types of word in today's English that still change their form according to how they are used in the sentence. Put simply, the form *he* is used as a substitute for masculine singular noun phrases, when the person referred to is performing the action of the verb; for example, '*He* killed the dragon.' In such sentences,

linguists make a distinction between the role that the pronoun is playing in the sentence (namely, the Subject) and the form that it takes (that is, the Nominative form). So in this case, the form that the pronoun takes when it plays the role of the Subject is the Nominative, *he*.

When the pronoun is the Object of the sentence, it takes a different form, which we call the Accusative; that is, *him*, as in 'The dragon killed *him*.' Here the pronoun is not responsible for the action; it is affected by it. In today's English, then, we have two forms for most pronouns, *I/me*, *he/him*, *she/her*, *we/us*, *they/them*, *who/whom*, depending on whether they are Nominative (i.e. functioning as Subject in the sentence) or Accusative (functioning as Object). This is an important point to grasp, because, as we shall soon see, this grammatical characteristic – that the form of a word changes according to the role that it plays in a sentence – is much more general in Old English than it is in today's English. While today only pronouns change their form depending on their grammatical role in the sentence, in Old English entire noun phrases, like *the dragon* and *the holy mother, Mary*, also change their form to indicate which role in the sentence they are playing.

Three common Old English pronouns are *hē* ('he'), *hēo* ('she') and *hit* ('it').

Although in some respects these Old English pronouns look a little different from those of today's English, in other important ways they are similar. As we have seen in English today, pronouns change their form according to their *gender* (masculine, feminine and neuter) as well as the way they are used in a sentence. In the following examples, we can see further how pronouns replace singular nouns and noun phrases in a few simple sentences:

	Subject	**Verb**	**Object**
Masculine	God	sent	his angel, Gabriel
	He	sent	*him*
Feminine	Mary	sent	her mother
	She	sent	*her*
Neuter	The child	sent	his dog
	It	sent	*it*

In Old English, the table looks like this:

	Subject	**Verb**	**Object**
Masculine	God	āsende	his engel, Gabrihel
	Hē	āsende	*hine*
Feminine	Māria	āsende	hire mōdor
	Hēo	āsende	*hīe*
Neuter	Þæt cild	āsende	his hund
	Hit	āsende	*hit*

As well as changing their form for gender, pronouns change form to indicate plurals. The full range of pronouns, singular and plural, is given below:

Present-day English

	Singular					*Plural*		
Nominative	I	you	he	she	it	we	you	they
Accusative	me	you	him	her	it	us	you	them

Old English

	Singular					*Plural*		
Nominative	ic	þū	hē	hēo	hit	wē	gē	hīe
Accusative	mē	þē	hine	hīe	hit	ūs	ēow	hīe

As you might have noticed, the form *hīe* is used to mean different things in Old English – effectively when you see *hīe* in an Old English text, you have to decide from the context whether it means ‘her’, ‘they’ or ‘them’. As in today’s English, when the pronoun is plural (i.e. when *hīe* means ‘they’ or ‘them’), it can substitute for nouns that are masculine (‘three warriors’ > ‘they’), feminine (‘three girls’ > ‘they’) or neuter (‘three ships’> ‘they’).

The meaning of ‘case’

So far we have noted that, in both present-day and Old English, the form of the pronoun often changes, depending on whether it is expressing the Subject (‘he/she’) or the Object (‘him/her’) of the

sentence. This grammatical signal, known as *case*, is used in many languages, ancient and modern, in order to tell us, for example, who is acting in any sentence (i.e. the Subject), and who is being acted upon (i.e. the Object). Different languages have different numbers of cases that express different kinds of meaning. As we shall see, Old English actually has four cases; that means that there are up to four different forms of the pronoun, depending on what meaning it is being used to express.

It is a good idea to familiarise yourself with the pronouns, particularly because they occur so frequently in Old English texts. Take note of the idiosyncrasies of the pronoun system – be aware, for example, that *hēo* means ‘she’. The second person pronoun is easier to memorise if you recall that *þū* and *þē* correspond to the older forms ‘thou’ (Nominative) and ‘thee’ (Accusative).

So far we have focused mainly on the Nominative and Accusative cases, that is, the forms used when the pronoun is Subject or Object. The third case, the Genitive, is easy for today’s English speakers to master because it is simply the form that signifies possession. When Old English pronouns are in the Genitive case, they identify other nouns, for example ‘*my* horse, *your* hound, *his* lady’. The Old English Genitive forms of the pronoun, with their present-day equivalents, are given below:

Present-day English

	Singular					*Plural*		
Genitive	my	your	his	her	its	our	your	their

Old English

	Singular					*Plural*		
Genitive	mīn	þīn	his	hire	his	ūre	ēower	hira

Summary

In Old English, words that refer to people and things can be found in different forms, according to their gender (masculine, feminine, or neuter), their number (singular or plural), and their grammatical function in the sentence (Nominative forms express the Subject, Accusative forms express the Object, and Genitive forms express possession). The pronouns of both current English and Old English

show these different forms. As we shall shortly see, however, the case system in Old English is much more extensive than it is in English today. One difference is that in Old English there is another case, the Dative, which is often used after a preposition, e.g. *for* him, *by* him, *to* him, *with* him, and so on. We will consider the meaning, form and use of the Dative case in detail in Chapter 4.

Reading practice

Let us look at these pronouns as they appear in different short excerpts from Henry Sweet's version of a translation into Old English of Ælfric's Latin *Colloquy*, one of the earliest surviving language-teaching manuals produced in the British Isles. In these extracts, the speaker asks various workers who they are and what they do. In each of the three dialogues, identify the occupation being described. Remember it is not yet necessary to identify every word in the passage; at the moment we are looking simply for a general understanding of the text. However, some useful words are listed in alphabetical order and defined briefly before each excerpt. The answers to the questions and some discussion follow the excerpts.

Occupation (1)

bēag ring
fētt feeds
for-þǣm because
gefō capture
hwīlum sometimes
oþþe or
scrytt clothes (verb)
selle, selþ give(s)
swā hwæt swā whatever
ymb concerning

Canst þū ǣnig þing?
Ānne cræft ic cann.
Hwelcne cræft canst þū?
Ic eom hunta.
Hwæs hunta eart þū?
Ic eom þæs cyninges hunta.
Hwæt dēst þū ymb þīnne huntoþ?
Ic selle þǣm cyninge swā hwæt swā ic gefō, for-þǣm ic eom his hunta.
Hwæt selþ hē þē?
Hē scrȳtt mē wel and fētt, and hwīlum hē mē hors selþ oþþe bēag.

Occupation (2)

be about
magon can
būtan without
beþurfon need
furþum even
gefērscipe community
secge say
tō āwihte at all, 'a whit'
ūt-ādrifaþ cast out, banish
wyrta vegetables

Hwæt secge wē be þǣm cōce? Hwæþer wē his cræftes tō āwihte beþurfon?
Gif gē mē of ēowrum gefērscipe ūt-ādrifaþ, gē etaþ ēowre wyrta grēne and ēowre flǣsc-mettas hrēawe; ne magon gē furþum fǣtt broþ habban būtan mīnum cræfte.

Occupation (3)

ac but
andgiete understanding, intellect
ascige ask
būton except
dēoplīce deeply
Ēalā Oh!
geornlīce eagerly
leornige learn
līcaþ please
mǣþ capacity
nīetenu animals
nyllaþ do not wish
nyton do not know
sprǣc talk, speech
spricst say
stunt stupid
swā-swā as, like
þearle very
þonne then
wille, willaþ wish, wishes

Ēalā gē cild, hū līcaþ ēow þēos sprǣc?
Wel hēo ūs līcaþ; ac þearle dēoplīce þū spricst and ofer ūre mǣþ. Ac sprec wiþ ūs æfter ūrum andgiete, þæt wē mægen understandan þā þing þe þū spricst.
Ic āscige ēow, 'For hwȳ leornige gē swā geornlīce?'
For-þǣm wē nyllaþ bēon swā-swā stunt nīetenu, þe nān þing nyton būton gærs and wæter.
Hwæt wille gē þonne bēon?
Wē willaþ wīse bēon.

Discussion

With a little effort you have probably realised that the first dialogue is with the king's hunter, the second with a cook, and the third with a group of young scholars, keen to learn, and so probably intending to be monks. At this point we are mainly concerned with exploring in

detail how the pronouns work in these passages, because once we have grasped the principles of pronoun use, we can extend our understanding to nouns and noun phrases in general. Let us therefore look at one sentence from each of the above texts:

(1) Hē scrȳtt mē wel and fētt, and hwīlum hē mē hors selþ oþþe bēag.
(2) Gif gē mē of ēowrum gefērscipe ūt-ādrifaþ, gē etaþ ēowre wyrta grēne and ēowre flǣsc-mettas hrēawe . . .
(3) Wel hēo ūs līcaþ; ac þearle dēoplīce þū spricst and ofer ūre mǣþ.

Sentence (1) corresponds to present-day English 'He clothes and feeds me well, and sometimes he gives me a horse or ring'. Notice that the word order is different in present-day and Old English, where the actual order of words is 'He clothes me well and feeds, and sometimes he me horse gives or ring'. The order of words is more flexible in Old English than in English today, partly because in Old English the cases of the pronouns and, as we shall see, the noun phrases, often tell us who is doing what to whom. For example, in the sequence, *hē mē hors selþ*, we know that the king is doing the giving, because *hē* is in the Nominative case, which is the form that expresses the Subject ('**he** gives'), while *mē* can be read as the Accusative ('he gives **me**') or the Dative ('he gives **to me**').

One lesson to learn from this sentence is to expect flexibility in word order in Old English sentences, and to pay attention to the cases of pronouns and nouns. Indeed, Sentence (2) also has a word order that departs from the order expected in English today. Its actual word order is 'If **you me** of your community cast out, you eat your vegetables green and your meats raw'. To translate the cook's comment into current English, we have to rearrange the pronouns and the verb: 'If **you** cast **me** out of your community, you eat your vegetables green and your meats raw'. 'Green' has the sense of 'unripe' here. Again, the case of the pronouns tells us who is doing the casting out and who is being cast out.

Sentence (3) also has an unusual word order, seen from today's perspective: 'Well **it us** pleases, but very deeply you speak, and beyond ('over') our understanding'. Once more, to render this sentence in today's English we would change the word order: **'It** pleases **us** well, but you speak very deeply, and beyond our understanding'. Here Ælfric's young monks, like many language beginners, are keen to learn but feel that their teacher is moving too fast.

Nouns and noun phrases

At the risk of emulating Ælfric's stern teacher, let us now move on to consider nouns and noun phrases in full. So far we have looked only at pronouns, like 'he' 'she' and 'it', in present-day and Old English. The advantage of starting with pronouns is that some of them today still have the case forms that we find in Old English, for example 'I/he/she' (Nominative) and 'me/him/her' (Accusative). They also have separate singular and plural forms (e.g. 'I/we' and 'he/they') and they have masculine, feminine and neuter forms ('he/she/it'). The present-day English pronoun system is therefore not in principle different from the Old English system. But the noun system is.

Nouns are those words, like 'angel' or 'mother' or 'ship', that name people and things. They generally have singular and plural forms, and they can be expanded into phrases by adding descriptive *adjectives* ('**good/bad** angel') and a set of other types of word, generally called *determiners* because they specify *which* noun we are talking about ('**a/the/this/that/any** good angel').

With a single exception, nouns and noun phrases in today's English do not explicitly signal their case. That is, there is no way of knowing whether, out of context, a noun phrase like 'the good angel' is the Subject or the Object of a sentence. (The exception is that the apostrophe used in the present-day possessive form, as in 'the angel**'s** head', is a relic of the old Genitive case *þæs engle***s** *hēafod*.) In Old English, the noun phrase contains a number of extra grammatical clues that signal this kind of subtle information.

Let us look first at the noun itself. The Old English word *engel* 'angel' does not change its form in the Nominative and Accusative. Therefore, out of context, we have no clue as to whether this word would function as the Subject or Object in a complete sentence. However, when we add a determiner and an adjective to make a full noun phrase, something interesting happens. There are different possible forms of the phrase 'the good angel', for example:

se gōda engel

þone gōdan engel

In the first instance, the *Nominative* form of both 'the' (*se*) and 'good' (*gōda*) tell us that, in the context of a sentence, this phrase will act as the Subject. In the second instance, the *Accusative* form of 'the' (*þone*)

and 'good' (*gōdan*) tell us that in a sentence this phrase will act as the Object.

One of the main differences between today's English and Old English is that in the latter, the individual members of *all* full noun phrases change their form to signal number (singular or plural), gender (masculine, feminine or neuter), and case (Nominative, Accusative, Genitive or Dative). Moreover, masculine, feminine and neuter nouns have different case endings: the Accusative ending of a masculine noun will be different from the Accusative ending of a feminine or a neuter noun. The result is that Old English nouns have – to modern eyes – a bewildering variety of forms. Let us look at three examples (a masculine noun phrase, a feminine one and a neuter one) simply to illustrate this variety:

	Masculine	**Feminine**	**Neuter**
	'the good angel'	*'the good mother'*	*'the good ship'*
Nom.	se gōda engel	sēo gōde mōdor	þæt gōde scip
Acc.	þone gōdan engel	þā gōdan mōdor	þæt gōde scip
Gen.	þæs gōdan engles	þǣre gōdan mōdor	þæs gōdan scipes
Dat.	þǣm gōdan engle	þǣre gōdan mōdor	þǣm gōdan scipe
	the good angels'	*'the good mothers'*	*'the good ships'*
Nom.	þā gōdan englas	þā gōdan mōdor	þā gōdan scipu
Acc.	þā gōdan englas	þā gōdan mōdor	þā gōdan scipu
Gen.	þāra gōdra engla	þāra gōdra mōdra	þāra gōdra scipa
Dat.	þǣm gōdum englum	þǣm gōdum mōdrum	þǣm gōdum scipum

For learners of the language, the numerical complexity of the combination of forms can be understandably off-putting. Added to the complexity is the fact that in Old English the gender of many words is conventional rather than 'natural'. Thus *sumor* 'summer' and *winter* 'winter, year' are masculine, *sprǣc* 'speech' and *miht* 'power' are feminine, and *gold* 'gold' and *dēor* 'wild animal' are neuter. When we come to read an Old English text, we have to realise that *all* words change cases according to their gender, and that it is not immediately obvious what is masculine, what is feminine and what is neuter. Even more perplexingly, for each gender there are several possible patterns of variation, similar to the ones given above. Each possible pattern is traditionally called a 'declension', or sometimes a 'paradigm'. For

example, here are some examples of masculine, feminine and neuter words in the Nominative and Accusative cases: *hlāf* 'loaf', *gefēra* 'comrade', *rōd* 'cross', *hlǣfdige* 'lady', *dēofol* 'devil' and *ēage* 'eye'. The first of each pair belongs to the type of declension sometimes referred to as 'strong'; the second belongs to the type sometimes referred to as 'weak'. Each noun is preceded by the appropriate form of the Old English word for 'the'.

Masculine	*Singular*		*Plural*	
Nominative	se hlāf	se gefēra	þā hlāfas	þā gefēran
Accusative	þone hlāf	þone gefēran	þā hlāfas	þā gefēran
Feminine				
Nominative	sēo rōd	sēo hlǣfdige	þā rōde/a	þā hlǣfdigan
Accusative	þā rōde	þā hlǣfdigan	þā rōde/a	þā hlǣfdigan
Neuter				
Nominative	þæt dēofol	þæt ēage	þā dēoflu	þā ēagan
Accusative	þæt dēofol	þæt ēagan	þā dēoflu	þā ēagan

Faced with a variety of word forms that at first glance seems overwhelming, the beginner might simply give up. However, there are ways to navigate the difficulties. There is a set of tips that can help beginners to deal with the complexity of Old English noun phrases while slowly familiarising themselves with the more finicky details.

- Pay particular attention to the different forms of 'the'. This is a limited number of words, and the different forms of 'the' in Old English have the virtue of letting the reader know the gender, case and number of the nouns they precede. Thus if you see ***se*** *gāst* 'the spirit', you know from the determiner ***se*** that the noun *gāst* 'spirit' is masculine, that it is singular and that it is in the Nominative case. In other words, the spirit is doing something in the sentence. If, on the other hand, you see ***þone*** *gāst* 'the spirit', you still know from the determiner ***þone*** that *gāst* is masculine and singular, but this time the noun is in the Accusative case, and something is being done to the spirit.
- As suggested earlier, pay attention to the *pronouns.* This is again a limited set of words and word-forms, and they are used frequently.
- Notice that the plurals of nouns and pronouns generally vary less than the singular forms. Try to familiarise yourself with the rela-

tively few plural forms, so as to be able to recognise them in a text. From the examples given above, you can see that some noun plurals end in -*s*, while many others end in -*n* and a few in -*u* or -*e* or -*a*. Most present-day English plurals end in -*s*, of course, but a few keep one of the ancient alternative endings, as in *children* and *oxen*.
- Notice that plural forms of the determiner 'the' are the same for all genders.

Some people like to memorise by rote *all* the possible variations in the forms of noun phrases; however, this is not necessarily the most effective way of coming to terms with these different forms in Old English. Another way is to read as much Old English as you can, referring only where necessary to tables of declensions to identify Nominatives, Accusatives, Genitives and so on. Often the sense of a passage will be clear without your having to refer to such tables. At the start you will find reading a little slow, but with frequent practice you will find that you can explore quite a lot of Old English with the help of a little grammatical information and a good glossary.

Let us look at a fairly simple passage of Old English – one so simple that, with a little patience and some thought, it should be almost comprehensible to a speaker of today's English. It is a version of 'The Incarnation' (see Illustration 8), that is, the Christian story of how God became embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, and of his childhood and adolescent years. It is typical of the kind of written text that survives from Anglo-Saxon culture, since, as has been mentioned already, most of the literate population had a religious occupation. The extract is adapted from a 'homily' or sermon, again by Ælfric. The sentences have been numbered for ease of reference.

Try reading the passage and picking out the words you understand, using the vocabulary-recognition strategies suggested in Chapter 2. Do not worry if you do not understand all the words in your first few readings of the text; we shall be looking at it in some detail shortly. However, it is important for you to get an early taste for – and to develop an enjoyment of – the struggle to make meaning of these challenging texts.

The Incarnation

(1) Þā se tīma cōm þe God fore-scēawode, þā āsende hē his engel Gabrihel tō ānum mǣden, sēo wæs Maria gehāten. (2) Þā cōm se engel tō hire, and hīe gegrette mid Godes wordum, and cȳdde hire

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> þæt Godes Sunu sceolde bēon ācenned of hire, būton weres gemānan. (3) And hēo þā gelȳfde his wordum, and wearþ mid cilde. (4) Þā þā hire tīma cōm, hēo ācende, and þurh-wunode mǣden. (5) Sēo hālige mōdor Maria þā āfēdde þæt cild, and hit wēox swā-swā ōþre cild dōþ, būton synne ānum.

Recognising words

Using the suggestions given in Chapter 2, and a little imagination, you might have recognised quite a few of the words in these five sentences. For example, in sentence (1):

tīma	time	*hē*	he	*tō*	to
cōm	came	*his*	his	*mǣden*	maiden
God	God	*engel*	angel	*wæs*	was
āsende	sent	*Gabrihel*	Gabriel		

A fairly literal translation of these five sentences would be:

> (1) When the time came that God pre-ordained (or 'had pre-ordained'), then he sent his angel, Gabriel, to a maiden, who was called Mary. (2) Then the angel came to her, and greeted her with God's words, and made known to her that God's Son should be born by her, without intercourse with a man. (3) And she then believed in his words, and became pregnant ('with child'). (4) When her time came, she gave birth, and remained a maiden (i.e. 'a virgin'). (5) The holy mother Mary then fed the child, and it grew ('waxed', as in 'waxed and waned') just as other children do, without a single sin.

Let us look now in more detail at some of the key features of this text, the people and things, highlighted below.

> (1) Þā **se tīma** cōm þe **God** fore-scēawode, þā āsende **hē his engel Gabrihel** tō ānum mǣden, sēo wæs **Maria** gehāten. (2) Þā cōm **se engel** tō hire, and **hīe** gegrette mid Godes wordum, and cȳdde hire þæt **Godes Sunu** sceolde bēon ācenned of hire, būton weres gemānan. (3) And **hēo** þā gelȳfde his wordum, and wearþ mid cilde. (4) Þā þā **hire tīma** cōm, **hēo** ācende, and þurh-wunode mǣden. (5) **Sēo hālige mōdor Maria** þā āfēdde **þæt cild**, and **hit** wēox swā-swā **ōþre cild** dōþ, būton synne ānum.

If we focus for the moment only on the highlighted words in this text, we can see how many of the people and things mentioned relate to each other. Let us look at the nouns and pronouns in the Nominative and Accusative cases:

Nominative forms (i.e. those words usually expressing Subjects of their sentences)

se tīma	*God*	*hē*	*sēo . . . Maria*	*se engel*
Godes Sunu	*hēo*	*hire tīma*	*hēo*	*mǣden*
Sēo hālige mōdor Maria	*hit*	*ōþre cild*		

Again, if we pay attention to the determiners of these Nominative forms, we can see that ***se*** *tīma* 'the time' and ***se*** *engel* 'the angel' are masculine, singular noun phrases, while ***sēo*** *hālige mōdor Maria* 'the holy mother Mary' is feminine singular. The pronoun *hit* 'it' shows that *cild* 'child' is considered to be neuter. Within the noun phrases, there are a number of Genitive forms, expressing possession: ***Godes*** *Sunu*, 'God's Son' and ***hire*** *tīma* 'her time'. A trickier example is the expression ***sēo*** *wæs* ***Maria*** *gehāten*, which literally means 'the/that was called Mary' but which we have translated as 'who was called Mary'.

Accusative forms (i.e. those words usually expressing Objects of their sentences)

his engel Gabrihel	*hīe*	*þæt cild*

As we expect of the Accusative case, things are happening to these people: God sent his angel Gabriel (*his engel Gabrihel*), Gabriel in turn greeted her (*hīe,* i.e. Mary), and Mary fed the child (*þæt cild*).

If we look at the text again, we can see, for example, different words for 'she/her': *hēo* 'she' when the pronoun is the Subject ('she believed in his words'), and *hīe* 'her' when the pronoun is the Object ('the angel greeted her'). In addition, the Genitive *hire* 'her' is used with another noun to express possession in *hire tīma* 'her time'. The same form, *hire* 'her', is also used in the Dative case, when some kind of prepositional meaning is made explicit or implied, as in *tō hire* 'to her', *of hire* 'from/by her', and *cȳdde hire* 'made known (to) her'. (A further example of the Dative, this time a neuter plural noun phrase, is found in *gelȳfde* ***his wordum*** 'believed **(in) his words**'. Again, a prepositional meaning is implied.)

Further reading practice

As Ælfric's story of the Incarnation continues, it becomes clear that what the monk wishes to communicate is the divine nature of Jesus. The excerpt we have just considered ends with him stating that Jesus was exceptional as a child in that he was *būton synne ānum* 'without a single sin' (literally, 'without sin one'). In the unfolding of Ælfric's story, the monk is careful to emphasise the exceptional and supernaturally powerful qualities of Jesus as he grows older. Read the passage and check how many of the questions you can answer.

- How old was Jesus when he began to perform miracles?
- Why, in Ælfric's view, did Jesus work miracles?
- Which four miracles does Ælfric mention?

Some useful vocabulary is given below. However, some relevant vocabulary is contained in the first excerpt, translated above, and some vocabulary (e.g. *āwende*) can be guessed from the context of the passage. The answers to the questions are given in the discussion that ends the chapter.

ǣr-þan þe before
bearn child (compare Scots 'bairn')
ēode went
hǣse command
on þǣre mennisc-nysse in human form, 'in the incarnation'

> (6) Hē wæs būton synnum ācenned, and his līf wæs eal būton synnum. (7) Ne worhte hē þēah nāne wundra openlīce ǣr-þan þe hē wæs þrītig-wintre on þǣre mennisc-nysse. (8) Þā worhte hē fela wundra, þæt men mihton gelȳfan þæt hē wæs Godes bearn. (9) Hē āwende wæter tō wīne, and ēode ofer sǣ mid drīum fōtum, and hē gestilde windas mid his hǣse, and hē forgēaf blindum mannum gesihþe.

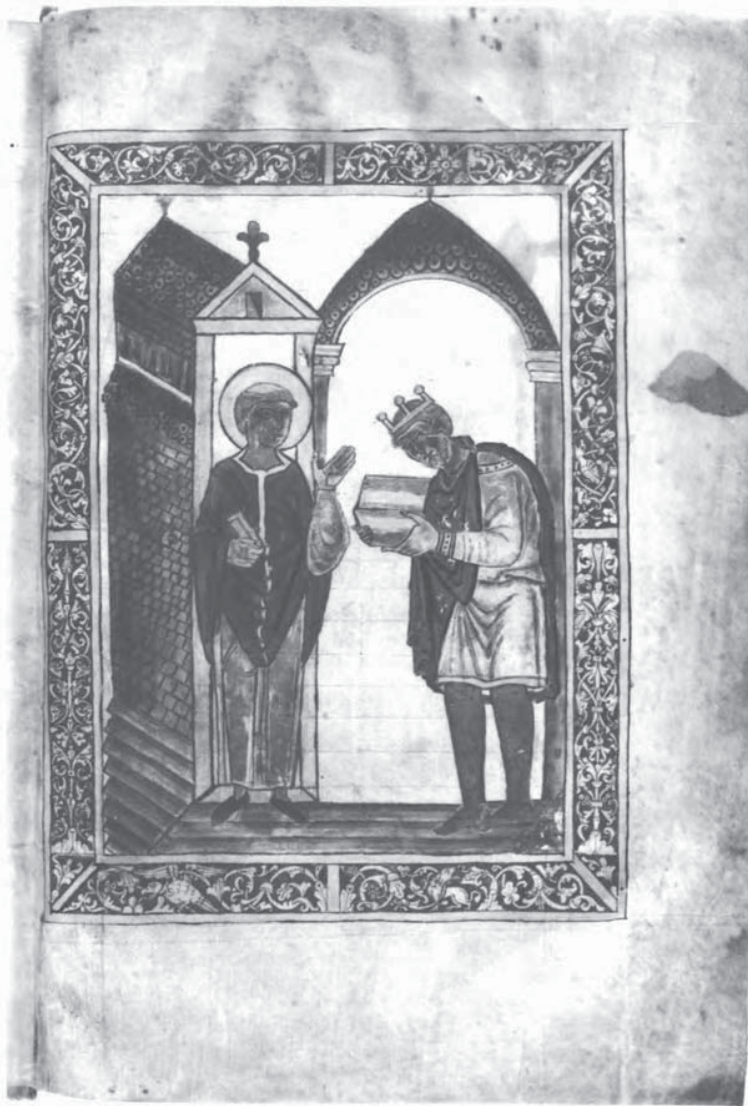
As well as telling the story of the Gospel, monks like Ælfric needed to impress upon their Anglo-Saxon listeners the relevance of the Christian message to their own experience and history. Old English literature is full of stories of saints' lives (and deaths) and the miraculous deeds performed by holy men in England. Saint Cuthbert, the seventh-century bishop of the island monastery of Lindisfarne, was the subject of no fewer than three 'Lives', one of them by an anonymous monk and the other two by Bede (see Illustration 9).

In the following tale from another of Ælfric's homilies, Cuthbert is consulted by an Abbess, Ælfflæd, about the future of her brother, Ecgfrid. Try reading the story and answering the questions. To do this you do not need to understand every single word, though some keywords are explained and others have already appeared in earlier passages. It is a good idea when reading this passage to focus on the forms of the nouns and pronouns, paying attention to which are masculine and which are feminine, which are singular and which are plural, and which case each is in. By attending to these issues, it should be easier to make sense of the story.

- What was Ecgfrid's position in society?
- What did the Abbess wish to know about him?
- What was Cuthbert's response?
- After hearing his response, what was the Abbess's main concern?
- How did Cuthbert attempt to calm her fears?
- How was Cuthbert's prophecy fulfilled?
- At what point in Cuthbert's life did this event happen?

æþela noble
befrān asked
brūcan possess
fela many
fōn succeed, take over
gecorenne chosen (one)
gehealden held
hālga holy, holy one
hālsigenne entreat
lēode people
lēof beloved, dear
næfþ does not have (*ne* + *hæfþ*)
ofer Drihtnes willan against God's will
Peoht Pict
rīces kingdom
rīxode reigned
Scyppend Creator
siþþan afterwards
þonne since
þyssere this
ylcan same

> Fela wundra wurdon geworhte þurh þone hālgan Cuþberht. Þā cōm him tō sum abbudysse, sēo wæs Ælflǣd gehāten, þæs cyninges sweostor Ecgfrides. Þā begann hēo to hālsigenne þone hālgan wer þæt he sceolde hire secgan hū lange hire brōþor Ecgfridus mōste his rīces brūcan.



9 King Athelstan presents Bede's *Lives of St Cuthbert* to St Cuthbert: Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 183, fol. 1v

> Þā andwyrde hire se hālga, and cwæþ þæt se brōþor ne mōste his līfes brūcan ofer þǣm ānum gēare. Hēo befrān, 'Hwā sceal tō his rīce fōn, þonne hē bearn næfþ?' Þā cwæþ se hālga wer eft to þǣm mǣdene, 'Se æl-mihtiga Scyppend hæfþ gehealden sumne gecorenne þyssere lēode tō cyninge, and sē biþ þē swā lēof swā nū is se ōþer.'
>
> On þǣm ylcan gēare wearþ ofslegen Ecgfridus, se æþela cyning, þā þā hē on Peohtum begann to feohtenne ofer Drihtnes willan; and his brōþor siþþan rīxode. Þā wæs gefylled sēo fore-sǣde sprǣc, swā swā se hālga wer sǣde þǣm mǣdene be hire gebrōþrum, ǣr he biscop wǣre.

Discussion of further reading

At this stage, the above passages for further reading will no doubt be deciphered only partially and with some labour. This is to be expected; however, with regular practice and revision your reading fluency will increase. To revise the vocabulary, as suggested in Chapter 2, begin devising your own glossary, grouping the unknown words according to their meaning (e.g. words for God: *God*, *Scyppend*, *Drihten*) and review them regularly.

Your understanding of the first of the two passages will probably be easier if you are familiar with the Christian story. Ælfric tells his listeners that Jesus did not perform miracles ('wonders') openly until he was thirty years old (or 'thirty winters in human form'). He also tells us that Jesus performed miracles so that the people would believe that he was God's child (*Godes bearn*). The four miracles mentioned are the turning of water into wine, going across the sea with dry feet ('walking on water'), calming ('making still') the winds with his command, and giving blind men sight.

The second passage is probably more difficult, in part because the story is less well known. A fairly literal translation is given below, in unidiomatic present-day English, and it contains the answers to the questions posed above.

> Many wonders were wrought through the holy Cuthbert. Then a certain abbess came to him, who was called Ælfflæd, sister of the king Ecgfrid. Then she began to entreat the holy man that he would tell her how long her brother Ecgfrid might be allowed to possess his kingdom.

Then the holy (one) answered her, and said that the brother would not be allowed to possess his life beyond the one year. She asked, ‘Who shall succeed to his kingdom, since he has no child?’ Then the holy man said again to the maiden, ‘The almighty Creator has preserved a certain chosen (one) as king of this people, and he will be as dear to you as now the other is.’

In the same year, Ecgfrid, the noble king, was slain when he began to fight the Picts against God’s will; and his brother ruled afterwards. Then the aforesaid speech was fulfilled, just as the holy man told the maiden about her brothers, before he was bishop.

Summary

In this chapter, we focused on the means of expressing people and things, through pronouns and noun phrases, and we looked at the way in which Old English grammar signals the gender, number and case of the participants in narratives, fables and legends. In the following chapter, we continue our exploration by turning our attention to ways of expressing place, time, manner and reason.