

TEXT-BODIES

A CRUCIAL ACTANT

WE LACK A substantial corpus of documents written by people who participated in Alfredian reform, or who observed it, or who recounted stories about it. We can however identify agents of change in objects, discussed in this chapter, and in behaviours, discussed in the next chapter. This chapter focuses on the persuasive agency of the Alfredian texts as “text-bodies.” Assemblage theory is used because of its flatter ontology, its wide recognition of the ability of objects, people, places, and ideas to do and to bring about through their interactions.¹ The focus is on the recursive connections between the text-bodies, the people who handled them, and the cultural constructs which shaped people’s responses to Alfredian text-bodies.

The understanding of a text as a physical object, important in its materiality and in its connections to identity and values, is neither new nor solely the province of assemblage theory. Henrike Lähnemann has explored medieval prayer books as cultural objects in both their original and modern contexts.² Treharne’s recent monograph on medieval perceptions of manuscripts explicitly conceptualizes the book as a “being-in-the-world.”³ What assemblage theory adds to the analysis of texts as things is its understanding of agency as relational and emergent, and its focus on the connections between the disparate elements of a text-body.

Outline of the Argument Applying Assemblage Theory

There were a variety of important actants in the assemblage of the Alfredian text-body: the early medieval belief in the inherent power of certain books; the Alfredian style of collaborative learning; the delicate balance of political power in Alfred’s community; the variable contexts in which Alfredian text-bodies were to be used; the plainness of these text-bodies; the use of

1 Hamilakis, *Archaeology and the Senses*.

2 Lähnemann, “From Devotional Aids”; Lähnemann, “Materiality of Medieval Manuscripts.”

3 Treharne, *Perceptions*, 1.

first-person voices (Alfred's in the Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care*, and the text-bodies themselves in the Verse Preface to the *Pastoral Care* and the Verse Preface to the *Dialogues*); and the Old English cultural norm of the speaking object inscription. (Whenever I refer to Alfred's first-person voice in the Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care* in this chapter, I mean his ostensible voice—consistent with my conceptualization of “Alfred”; but I won't keep repeating the caveat about corporate authorship.) These actants are very different in character. It is possible to identify other actants—such as the social role of treasure and the cultural norm of authority in translation. These are so deeply embedded in the content of the texts, in Alfredian ideology (see chapter 3), that I choose to put these to one side, to concentrate on actants which I have not already discussed.

The agency of an Alfredian text-body emerged from its actants being brought into association with, and impacting upon, each other. For example, the early medieval belief in the power of certain books interacted with the cultural norm of the speaking object to amplify the agency of the prefaces to the *Pastoral Care* and the *Dialogues* in which the book spoke about itself. The use of the king's own voice in the Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care* interacted with the plainness of the text-body to create a levelling effect, bringing the audience closer to their king. That levelling effect, the creation of a communal sense of endeavour, was particularly persuasive in a context of dispersed political power in Alfred's kingdom. The interactions between actants are not sequential but contemporaneous. The text-body's agency emerged from (and was a consequence of) the interplay between its component parts.

I start my analysis of the actants in Alfredian text-bodies with the early medieval belief in the inherent power of certain books, before turning to Carolingian examples. The Carolingian examples demonstrate that text-bodies could be deliberately manipulated to form a discourse of power, by harnessing cultural norms. “Alfred” could have followed these exemplars, but did not. Three important actants explain why Alfredian text-bodies are so different from the Carolingian examples. They are: the Alfredian style of collaborative learning; the delicate balance of political power in Wessex; and the variable contexts in which Alfredian text-bodies were to be used. The plainness of the Alfredian texts is explicable as a deliberate choice in light of these other actants. I then look at several of the Alfredian prefaces, showing how content can itself be an actant. For example, the king's first-person voice interacted with the plainness of the text-bodies and the decentralized political landscape. Anglo-Saxon cultural attunement to the speaking object amplified the persuasiveness of the Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care* and the Preface to the *Dialogues*.

Each actant contributes to the agency of the assemblage. Each actant must therefore be separately identified before its relationship with other actants can be properly understood. I start with the broadest cultural actant, the early medieval understanding of the power of books as objects.

The Early Medieval Experience of Text

Agency is always context-specific.⁴ The experience of, and response to, text varies considerably across periods and cultures.⁵ It follows that any inquiry into the agency of Alfredian text-bodies must consider the context in which they were produced, disseminated, and used. There are indications that early medieval perceptions of texts could be very different from ours. The modern Western experience of texts is heavily influenced by a belief in the separation of mind and body, a dichotomy between the signifier and the underlying meaning, usually attributed to Descartes's influence.⁶ It is salutary that some modern authors on textuality whose work has been produced digitally confess to unease over the lack of a *book*, a physical manifestation of their ideas with which their audience can interact.⁷ Traditionally, Western scholarship on medieval manuscripts has tended to "read through" the text-as-object to interpret the meaning of the words on the page, although some scholars have called for more attention to be paid to the text as object.⁸ The consequence of a narrow focus on discerning meaning is that the "purely material" signifier slides from view.⁹

The narrowness of Western focus does not only apply to texts. Nina Eidsheim critiques Western preoccupation with the notation of music—"the quantifiable, idealised and abstract"—over the sensed, perceived, *lived* experience of music—a collectivity of bodies (performer and audience), spaces, and materials.¹⁰ It is possible to identify some of the ways in which modern Western culture differs from Alfred's world; being attentive to those cultural differences will assist in considering how Alfredian text-bodies operated and were effective.

4 Johnson, "Self-Made Men," 213.

5 Nichols, "Image," 10–11; Foys, *Virtually Anglo-Saxon*, 19.

6 Kendrick, *Animating the Letter*, 2; Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 1–2.

7 Kendrick, *Animating the Letter*, 2; Foys, *Virtually Anglo-Saxon*, 3.

8 Lähnemann, "Materiality of Medieval Manuscripts," 124; Treharne, "Manuscript Sources," 93; Treharne, "Fleshing Out the Text."

9 Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 81.

10 Eidsheim, "Sensing Voice," 134–35.

Hans Gumbrecht defines modern Western culture as a “meaning culture” and early medieval Europe as a “presence culture.” These are typologies. Gumbrecht argues that a “presence culture” has a number of characteristics; some of these are applicable to Alfred’s Wessex. First, in a presence culture, the dominant self-reference is not the mind, but the body. Second, people in a presence culture perceive themselves to be part of the world, in-the-world, in a physical and spatial way, and their bodies are therefore an essential part of their existence. Third, knowledge is revealed, rather than produced by an individual’s conscious act of interrogation and world-interpretation. Fourth, there is no disjunct between signifier and signified, but an Aristotelian coupling between substance and form, which means that materiality does not fade from view in the search for meaning.¹¹ Aristotle argued that without sensory perception, there is no thought.¹² Antiquity bequeathed this concept to the early Middle Ages.¹³

For people in the early medieval period, the experience of texts was “an immersive sensory experience.”¹⁴ Bede provides an example of the unreflexive conjoining of mind and body in using a text. In *De computo vel loquela digitorum*, Bede’s exposition of the complicated arithmetic required to calculate the correct date for Easter each year is part mental, part physiological exercise: flexing and positioning fingers, hands and arms as a bodily abacus.¹⁵ Bede’s *De temporum ratione* (BL, Royal MS 13 A XI) contains an engaging illustration of Roman finger-reckoning (fol. 33v).¹⁶ Bede’s deployment of the body in mental activity was by no means unusual; memorization, as an early medieval educational method, frequently involved rhythmic body movements as a physical mnemonic, a seamless combination of mind and body in the pursuit of knowing and learning.¹⁷ Memorization, repeating back to a teacher what the teacher has modelled orally, was one form of what Paul Zumthor and Marilyn Engelhardt call “voiced discourse,” grounded in the human body. However, it is important not to assume that modern and medieval phenomenological experiences are equivalent.¹⁸ Meg Boulton urges an awareness of cultural differences in perception. She argues

11 Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 79–86.

12 Gregoric and Fink, “Sense Perception,” 15.

13 Vogt-Spira, “Senses, Imagination,” 51; Robertson, “Medieval Materialism.”

14 Christie, “Image of the Letter,” 130.

15 Jones, *Beda opera*, 1:179–81.

16 Reproduced in Breay and Story, *Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, 268.

17 Kendrick, *Animating the Letter*, 27, 29.

18 Zumthor and Engelhardt, “Text and Voice,” 69, 70.

that early medieval people had a peri-performative engagement with material artifacts which involved a spatial component that is quite different to modern understandings of spatial perspective.¹⁹

In search, therefore, of useful analogies to understand early medieval textuality, I suggest that the early medieval liturgy provides a valuable example of the interaction between the senses and the intellect. The liturgy entailed a phenomenological experience of the material world, involving all the senses, at the same time as participants absorbed and affirmed a powerful ideology. While the words and ideas, the meaning, were crucial to the liturgy, the liturgy was also a performance, a multidimensional physicality. It comprised space, bodies, movement (the ritual movements of those officiating and the responsive bodily movements of the participants), objects (texts, relics, chalices, and vestments) sound (music, singing, chanting, and speech), sight (static images and the ritual movements of those officiating, the vestments and paraphernalia, and the play of light), touch (kissing the bishop's ring, touching relics, statues, and sacred parts of the fabric of the church), and aromas (incense, candlewax, and, for those close enough, the smell of the sacred texts).

Religious worship took place in a textual community. Very few of those participating actually read the texts—but everyone present listened to the text being read aloud, saw the text being ritualistically handled, participated (to some degree) in the prescribed physical movements, and thereby performed a public affirmation of the ideology contained in the texts. While church rituals were intrinsically a combination of phenomenological elements—visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory—early medieval theologians were uneasy about, and ambivalent towards, the role of the senses and the body in Christian ideology.²⁰ This unease existed despite both Old and New Testament exhortations to eat the words of God as a way of understanding and absorbing the Word (Ezekiel 2:9–3:3; Revelation 10:8–11). Christian disquiet about the role of the senses was implicated in early patristic exhortations to look beyond the material script to the meaning of the words, their spiritual content. Jerome famously deplored the “Babylonian” decadence of sumptuously produced texts, written in gold on a purple background.²¹

Christian attitudes to text-bodies evolved over the early centuries of the medieval period. By the Carolingian era, some theologians were will-

19 Boulton, “End of the World.”

20 Palazzo, “Art, Liturgy,” 27–29.

21 Jerome, “Ad Eustochium” (384 CE) and “Ad Laetam” (403 CE) in Wright, *Jerome: Select Letters*, letter 22.32, 130–32; and letter 107.12, 364.

ing to employ the senses and affectivity to cultivate Christian virtue.²² In the eighth century, Boniface entreated Eadburga, the Abbess of Thanet, to procure for him a copy of the Epistles of Paul written in gold, with which he might “impress the eyes of the carnally minded while I preach.”²³ Boniface’s remarks imply a dispersed audience of listeners, who would see the text, and respond to it, but not read it for themselves. His remarks underscore the value of the senses in the task of persuasion, the goal of capturing hearts and minds. The Anglo-Saxons of the ninth century inherited a suite of cultural norms which provided a framework for their experiences of text-bodies.

Early Medieval Textual Strategies and Beliefs: The Power of Things

Early medieval Christian theology taught that the written words of Scripture made the invisible present in the world, manifested it, provided a material trace of immanence.²⁴ Eric Palazzo argues that Christian texts, as objects, were conceived as a way of accessing the sacred space of revelation. Opening the texts (“activating” them) made the invisible present, perceptible through the material form of the object and its graphic and iconographic layout.²⁵ Palazzo’s argument focuses on the efficacy of the bodily action of opening the text-body. Other gospel books were sealed in embellished containers, making them unreadable: the object was valued over access to the words.²⁶

Sacred texts were similar to those ritual objects of Christian worship which were held to have been made under divine instruction.²⁷ Manuscripts perceived to have been written by Christian saints inspired by a direct communion with God were also held to contain physical traces of the divine.²⁸ Some text-bodies were held to have a protective power by reason of the traces left behind of the saints who had handled the objects, a transfer of power through the senses, and a function of the text’s materiality.²⁹ The St. Cuthbert Gospel, which absorbed sanctity through its close proximity to the uncorrupted body of the saint over a period of centuries, is a good exam-

22 Appleby, “Instruction and Inspiration,” 86–87.

23 Emerton, *Letters of Saint Boniface*, letter 26, 42; Christie, “Image of the Letter,” 132.

24 Brown, “Book as Sacred Space,” 45.

25 Palazzo, “Art, Liturgy,” 39.

26 Diebold, *Word and Image*, 28.

27 Harting-Correa, *Walahfrid Strabo’s Libellus*, 75–81.

28 Kendrick, *Animating the Letter*, 16–17, 110.

29 Kendrick, *Animating the Letter*, 16–17.

ple.³⁰ Sue Brunning's analysis of early medieval swords demonstrates that text-bodies were not the only objects capable of being innately powerful.³¹ There was thus a tension between theological assertions of meaning's pre-eminence over form and early medieval belief that an object might have powers of its own.

The manifestation of the divine, the invisible made present in the liturgical or saintly text-body meant that these objects were not simply displayed or read from, but were actively engaged in Christian rituals. Church murals occasionally depict this active engagement: a sixth-century mosaic at San Vitale, Ravenna, shows an ornate text being censured together with the cross and paten as part of the procession to the altar.³² Religious texts were reverently *handled*: carried in processions to church and on pilgrimage, laid ceremoniously on the altar, kissed by the clergy conducting the service, and perfumed with incense before use in the service.³³ These text-bodies were not passive conduits.

Part of the text-body's ability to do and to bring about resides in the use of recognized and culturally sanctioned performance conventions focused on the text-body. The liturgy is one example of this, in its prescriptions for the ritualistic handling of the text-body. For certain texts produced by the Alfredian and Carolingian courts, relevant performance conventions were elements *outside* the narrative. These performance conventions engaged the audience in two very different discourses about power.³⁴

Carolingian Text-bodies: A Discourse of Power

The Godescalc Evangelistary (Paris, BnF, MS n.a.1 1203), produced for Charlemagne and his wife Hildegard between 781 and 783, is a good example of the deployment of the text-body in an ideological discourse. The text is written in gold and silver on a purple background. Gold, silver, and purple were the imperial colours of the Roman Empire. Their use in this setting was a reference to Charlemagne's claimed inheritance of Roman authority.³⁵ The Evangelistary was specifically used in the lavish celebrations of the main liturgical feasts in which Charlemagne took a leading role. Text-as-

³⁰ Treharne, *Perceptions*, 82.

³¹ Brunning, *Sword*, 139–56.

³² Kessler, "Book as Icon," 101.

³³ Palazzo, "Art, Liturgy," 41.

³⁴ Thomas, "Medieval Space," 10.

³⁵ Tekippe, "Copying Power," 143; Palazzo, "Art, Liturgy," 43.

object conflated both the glory of Christ and the glory of Charlemagne.³⁶ Text-bodies such as Charlemagne's Godescalc Evangelistary employed a display of wealth and a citation of the Roman imperial past as an integral part of their power and effect.

Charlemagne's use of text-bodies was part of a wider appropriation of materials, spaces, and iconography to reference and reinforce politically valuable connections. These connections were the legacies of the past (Roman imperial power) and current sources of legitimacy and authority (the church). The spatial layout and elevation of Charlemagne's court buildings at Aachen borrowed forms like the Roman triumphal arch and referenced earlier Christian court complexes in Ravenna, Rome, Benevento, and Constantinople.³⁷ Columns brought from Rome and Ravenna were incorporated into the fabric of Charlemagne's chapel and housed relics of the Apostles; these columns were placed on the same level of the chapel as Charlemagne's throne—placing him literally amongst the Apostles.³⁸ Charlemagne thus deployed various forms of materiality as well as text-bodies to promote his chosen ideology.

Charlemagne's heirs continued his practice of using text-bodies to reinforce concepts of power and authority. Louis the Pious, Lothair I, and Charles the Bald all manipulated the iconography and embellishment of religious texts and objects for ideological purposes, to impart a sense of Frankish destiny, and to glorify themselves.³⁹ The Vivian Bible (Paris, BnF, MS lat.1), the prayerbook of Charles the Bald (Munich, Residenz, Schatzkammer, Prayerbook) and the Munich *Codex Aureus* (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, MS Clm 14000) all draw parallels between Christ and Charles the Bald.⁴⁰ The Lothar Cross, a richly embellished golden processional cross commissioned by Lothar of France (r. 985–991), contains a portrait of Lothar, an antique cameo of the Roman emperor, Augustus, on one side, and Christian iconography engraved on the reverse.⁴¹ This was a complex interweaving of references to religious and secular authority.

The Carolingians deployed objects in a carefully crafted discourse on power and legitimacy. Their use of objects exploited the early medieval experience of text and the early medieval understanding of the power of objects.

36 Palazzo, "Art, Liturgy," 43.

37 Lobbedey, "Carolingian Royal Palaces," 137; Tekippe, "Copying Power," 147.

38 Snyder, *Medieval Art*, 192; Tekippe, "Copying Power," 147.

39 Webster, "Art of Alfred," 75.

40 Deshman, *Eye and Mind*, 185, 205–06.

41 Tekippe, "Copying Power," 153.

This forms a useful comparative for a consideration of the actants used to create the Alfredian text-body. Alfredian texts, as assemblages, contained some different actants to their Carolingian counterparts, which influenced both the production of Alfredian text-bodies and their reception.

Three Crucial Actants in the Alfredian Text-body

The importance of the interaction between various actants, the lively hum, can be demonstrated by considering three highly influential participants in Alfredian text-bodies. These particular actants influenced a slew of other actants, both material and relational. Collaborative learning, the delicate balance of political power, and the variable contexts in which Alfredian text-bodies were to be used, all influenced the choice of other components in the assemblage of the text-body. Interestingly, all three actants are incorporeal—demonstrating that ideas, cultural norms, and other intangibles can be part of an assemblage. These three actants also demonstrate that an actant can exist prior to an assemblage—can influence its creation and become part of the assemblage itself.

In terms of collaborative learning, literacy was a means to an end—the (re)acquisition and practice of Christian wisdom. Alfred intended his people to use texts as anchor points for discussion between themselves, the same way that he had learned. This format—not solitary study but group learning, not sustained reading but using texts to spark discussion and elucidate debate—meant that textual communities could be used to broadcast and inculcate Alfredian ideology. Collaborative learning had important implications for the kind of text-bodies that were needed. Alfredian text-bodies had to be tailored to a dispersed audience, listeners as well as readers—a larger group of people who might see the book reasonably close-up during the course of discussion, but not handle it greatly themselves.

Alfredian text bodies had to be both authoritative and approachable. Alfredian ideology emphasized that reorienting the kingdom back to God was a communal endeavour. Alfredian ideology also emphasized the reciprocal nature of the obligations which supported a well-functioning Christian community, reciprocity which bound a king just as much as his subjects. A Christian king had obligations to those entrusted to his care. Alfredian ideology thus operated to narrow the gap between the king and his subjects. Alfredian text-bodies needed to reinforce this aspect of Alfredian ideology—to bring the elites closer to the king, to persuade them to join him.

In terms of variable context, we can infer that these text-bodies were intended to be versatile, apt for a number of different textual communities.

For example, the command in the Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care* that the *æstel* be kept with the book wherever the book travelled necessarily implies an expectation that the book will be used in different contexts. These might include discussions between higher clergy on the obligation to teach or the importance of humility; discussions between a bishop and local reeves as to the fundamental principles of Christian wisdom applicable to the administration of justice; as a resource for those learning to read; or as an edifying text suitable to be read aloud within the bishop's household. The *domboc* was similarly flexible, appropriate for assemblies and judicial fora, but also for discussions between local administrators seeking practical guidance or "bigger picture" policy direction. The other translated texts and the *ASC* could be used as resources for teaching students (including adult ealdormen) to read, or to frame discussions on aspects of Alfredian ideology—dipping into the texts to use the portion appropriate for the occasion.

Having identified particularly important actants in the assemblage, I am going to use Bennett's categories of materiality and relationality to identify other actants in Alfredian text-bodies, and to explore the way they interacted with collaborative learning, political realities, and variable contexts.

Alfredian Text-bodies: Materiality

In considering the materiality of Alfredian text-bodies, I want to ask some questions. Did materiality influence the handleability of these text-bodies? Were these text-bodies apt for everyday use? Would Alfred's bishops have felt comfortable getting out their copy of the *Pastoral Care* during discussions with local councillors, reeves, or junior clergy? Would they have been content to pass the book around, or to rest the book on their knees as they searched for the passage they wanted to read out? Were the books appropriate to be handled in classrooms of occasionally careless schoolboys and in domestic spaces where ealdormen struggled to learn to read (and were sometimes bad-tempered about the task)?⁴² Could the *domboc* safely be put into a reeve's satchel while he was out and about on the king's business? Did the physicality of the book temper the relationship between king and subjects, suggest closeness or a sense of communal endeavour—or did it underscore rigid hierarchy and unapproachability?

While both the Carolingians and Alfred deployed text-bodies for ideological purposes, there is a vast difference between the deluxe Carolingian Bibles and psalters, such as the Godescalc Evangelistary, and the Alfredian

⁴² Asser, chap. 106.

texts. The Carolingian text-bodies discussed above were created for a specific context (religious worship), instantiated specific attributes of the emperor (divine approval, the inheritance of Roman imperial authority), and were agential in inculcating a particular ideology within that context. Alfredian text-bodies were a different assemblage, incorporating a different ideology and different actants to promote that ideology. This was a deliberate choice; Alfredian text-bodies could have followed the path set by the Carolingians. For example, one Anglo-Saxon manuscript (BL, Cotton MS Vespasian A VIII), probably produced after 966, contains thirty-three folios written entirely in gold, with illustrations linking King Edgar to Christ.⁴³

We have only one contemporary example of an Alfredian translation—Bodleian, MS Hatton 20 of the *Pastoral Care*. All other manuscripts are tenth- to twelfth-century copies. My argument rests explicitly on an assumption that Hatton 20 is typical of the manuscripts of the *Pastoral Care* disseminated to the various bishops (and perhaps selected abbots) and is broadly representative of Alfredian texts in general.

Hatton 20 was intended for Wærferth, Bishop of Worcester, one of Alfred's Mercian mentors on his personal path to wisdom. Wærferth was also the translator of the *Dialogi*, commissioned by Alfred. There is no reason to believe that Hatton 20 was produced to a lesser standard than other manuscripts of the *Pastoral Care*, and no scholar has suggested it. The ornamentation of Hatton 20 is largely consistent with ornamentation of the extant later manuscripts. A close look at Hatton 20 reveals consistent imperfections in the vellum, some of which were sufficiently large that the scribe had to work around them (fols. 12, 19, 23, and 25 in particular). The inference is that the vellum did not have to be of the highest quality—physical perfection was not the objective. Elizabeth Tyler describes Hatton 20 as “comparatively scrappy.”⁴⁴ This inference is consistent with the modest decoration of the manuscript.

The palette of Hatton 20 is of black ink, with infills of green, yellow, and red.⁴⁵ It was a relatively plain production. There are similarities between the ornamental initials in Hatton 20 and those in earlier manuscripts such as the late eighth-century Barberini Gospels (Rome, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica, MS Barberini Lat. 570, fols. 80, 125), the ninth-century Book of Cerne (Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Ll. 1. 10), and the

⁴³ Treharne, *Perceptions*, 117–20.

⁴⁴ Tyler and Mhaonaigh, “Looking East and West.”

⁴⁵ Webster, “Art of Alfred,” 72–74.

early tenth-century Tanner Bede (Bodleian, MS Tanner 10, fol. 5v).⁴⁶ Richard Gameson argues that Alfred revived this relatively plain style of decoration for his translations, using a style familiar in late eighth- and early ninth-century Southumbrian manuscripts, such as the Book of Cerne.⁴⁷ It is possible that Alfred's Mercian advisors brought this style to his attention. The decorated initials in Hatton 20 are also consistent with those in the later copies of the Alfredian texts, being depictions of entire small animals.⁴⁸

The modesty of ornamentation in the Alfredian texts presents a startling contrast to earlier manuscripts as well as to contemporary Frankish codices. Codices produced prior to Alfred's reign demonstrate that the Anglo-Saxons could produce sumptuous manuscripts. Asser records Alfred as a considerable patron of the arts, an avid inventor, a commissioner of fine buildings, a king who encouraged and supported foreign craftsmen at his court and who helped fill West Saxon churches with beautiful treasures.⁴⁹

Leslie Webster points out that even less prestigious texts produced contemporaneously with the Alfredian texts, such as the Mercian prayerbook (BL, Royal MS 2 A XX) and the Tiberius Bede (BL, Cotton MS Tiberius C II), for which the "Tiberius group" of manuscripts (including the Vespasian Psalter and the Stockholm Codex Aureus) is named, contained more lavish ornamentation than Alfred's texts.⁵⁰ The lack of ornamentation and visual display in Alfredian texts was a deliberate and meaningful choice, rather than an absence of appropriate technical skill or the wealth to commission such works of art. Webster argues that the lack of ornamentation and visual display in Alfred's manuscripts was designed to bring his elites closer to his way of thinking. In contrast, the sumptuous contemporary Carolingian manuscripts emphasized that the king stood apart, *sui generis*, from his aristocracy.⁵¹ Ornamentation, which appealed to multiple senses, could be integral to the experience of a text-body. The choice of ornamentation—lavish or modest—did not simply reflect meaning, but could help to shape it.⁵²

Webster's argument can be taken further. The Alfredian texts were plain because they were intended to be workaday objects; they were intended to be handled, consulted, and passed around. They were intended to be an eas-

⁴⁶ Webster, "Art of Alfred," 72–73; Brown, *The Book of Cerne*, 177.

⁴⁷ Gameson, "Tanner Bede," 120–22.

⁴⁸ Alexander, *Insular Manuscripts*; Deshman, *Eye and Mind*, 26.

⁴⁹ Asser, chaps. 91, 101. See also Pratt, "Persuasion and Invention," 190.

⁵⁰ Webster, "Art of Alfred," 74.

⁵¹ Webster, "Art of Alfred," 47–48, 75.

⁵² Hamburger, *Script as Image*, 4–5.

ily available point of reference precisely to encourage the practice of consultation and emulation. These were not objects of awe, whose rarity and costliness instantiated the power and wealth of the king who commissioned or owned them, brought out only for special occasions to dazzle those who saw them, and were otherwise securely stored in the king's treasury. That is one reason why the quality of the vellum for Hatton 20 was relatively unimportant and why the decoration was plain.

Alfredian texts were *handleable*—suitable to be stuffed in a satchel and transported, used in informal settings where a book might be passed around or read from during a casual gathering, or set down on a school table. The carefully chosen materiality of Alfredian text-bodies encouraged handleability, which increased the prospects that the texts would be accessed in a way appropriate for their content and purpose. In contrast, beautiful liturgical texts were handled with reverence, in prescribed settings with choreographed movements. There were no such normative constraints on the Alfredian text-bodies, because they were not service books, but books for instruction (with the possible exception of the *Prose Psalms*).⁵³

The alignment of materiality with function has been analyzed in other contexts. Anya Adair explores the links between design and function in the codex Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 383, containing a collection of Anglo-Saxon law codes; a relatively lightweight, compact codex suggests active, everyday use.⁵⁴ Erik Kwakkel cites the holster book as an example of function guiding form, a consequence of the close connection between manuscript producers and first user.⁵⁵ In an article on early gospel codices, the authors argue that early versions of the gospels were written as codices rather than on scrolls in part because they were intended to be workaday objects—"consulted, used, and revisited"—as practical tools to guide daily living, a means to an end. They were intended to be handled frequently.⁵⁶

Handleability was a function of the Alfredian text-bodies' materiality. Handleability also increased the sense of communal endeavour which Alfred needed to inculcate. The prosaic material form of Alfredian books made their contents more accessible to a greater number of people, in a wider range of contexts. The absence of gorgeous ornamentation narrowed the gap between the king and the audience—the opposite of the Carolingian deployment of materiality.

53 Gameson, "Alfred the Great," 201.

54 Adair, "Pocket Change," 77.

55 Kwakkel, *Decoding the Material Book*, 66.

56 Larsen and Letteney, "Christians and the Codex," 395.

“Handleable” materiality was thus an important aspect of the Alfredian text-body. I turn now to Bennett’s other classification—relationality. Relationality is obviously incorporeal, and it is very closely aligned to the content of the Alfredian text-bodies, to Alfredian ideology. There are several elements of Alfredian ideology which can be identified as actants in their own right. For example, the *domboc*’s recitation of Mosaic law was an intellectual and religious claim of legitimation for the laws themselves and a component of the concept of the *Angelcynn* as a Chosen People. The Mosaic law tradition was a relational actant in the text-body of the *domboc*. Similarly, the invocation of Gregory the Great, Apostle of the English, was a relational actant. The cultural norms of authority in translation and the social role of treasure were also relational actants. As I have already dealt with these elements, I shall focus here on the use of Alfred’s first-person voice and the text-body itself, and the related cultural norm of the speaking object inscription. I show how these actants interacted with the materiality of the Alfredian text-body to increase its agency, its persuasive appeal.

The Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care*: “Alfred” Speaks Directly to His People

In the *Pastoral Care*, the levelling effect of the text-body’s materiality was amplified by the inclusion of a preface in the king’s own voice. I looked at the way the Prose Preface articulated Alfredian ideology in chapter 3; what I want to consider here is the effect of (what appeared to be) Alfred speaking directly to his people. While the *Pastoral Care* was distributed to the bishops (and possibly abbots), it is likely that the Prose Preface had a much wider circulation and was accessed in a variety of contexts. The use of the king’s first-person voice helped to form a link between the audience (readers and listeners) and their king.

Brief first-person comments can be found in the introduction to documents issued in the name of a king, such as law codes and charters—V Æthelstan and the charter recording the grant from Æthelwulf, king of Wessex, to Dunn, 855, for example.⁵⁷ However, the extended monologue and relaxed, ruminatory, tone of the Prose Preface were arrestingly novel. Those lower down in the social hierarchy had probably never been addressed thus by their king. In talking directly to the audience, by using the first-person voice, “Alfred” bridged the gap between face-to-face communication and the transcribed words on the page, collapsing Seth Lehrer’s distinction between a

57 *EHD*, no. 36, 422–23. See also S 315.

literature of presence and a literature of absence.⁵⁸ While the first-person voice of the king was distinctive, arresting even, it utilized existing traditions in OE literature. Isolated public speeches—independent and autonomous—are a feature of *Beowulf* and other poems. In hagiographic literature, such speeches often had a didactic purpose.⁵⁹ Alfred's audience were culturally conditioned to attend closely to the first-person voice.

Having been cued that the Preface was important, the first-person voice brought the audience closer to their king. They could hear (what appeared to be) their king expressing his own thoughts, in his own words, as though he was conversing with them. This direct appeal could operate across a variety of contexts, different textual communities, beyond the bishops who first received the text. There were doubtless others with whom the bishops discussed the king's ideas. One can envisage, for example, local officials discussing the *domboc* in relation to a local dispute or an upcoming assembly. The bishop reaches for his copy of the *Pastoral Care* to read out part of the Prose Preface to them, to give them an overview or reminder of the king's thinking and goals, or to prod them to participate in the king's reforms.

In such a scenario, there would be an interaction between direct speech and the early medieval experience of, and beliefs about, texts. After all, books were rare and costly, no matter how imperfect the vellum or plain the decoration. And this was a copy of a book ostensibly provided by the king, in which he speaks directly to his audience. If the text-body was passed around, then I think it is reasonable to infer that those who handled it were acutely *physically* aware of the importance and novelty of what they were holding. Lara Farina refers to the "skin-on-skin experience" of holding a parchment codex.⁶⁰ That phenomenological experience of the text-body may have been amplified by early medieval beliefs in the power of particular text-bodies. Irvine describes Alfred's first-person voice as a "bridge between text and audience, identifying the vernacular book as an autonomous object with authority but also as an animate and engaging presence, reaching out directly so as to move hearts and minds."⁶¹

The Prose Preface is an appealing text for students new to Old English. It is not a great stretch to assume that it was similarly engaging for ealdormen who may have used it to learn to read, or for youths in the *scholae*. The intimate tone of the Preface was doubtless part of its appeal; the camaraderie, the

58 Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, 4, 21.

59 Louviot, *Direct Speech*, 35–36.

60 Farina, "Get a Grip," 105.

61 Irvine, *Uncertain Beginnings*, 17–18.

invitation to the audience to agree and to join their king was a large part of its charm. “Alfred” solicited the active agreement and cooperation of his people. The persuasive power of Alfred’s Prose Preface was amplified by the interaction between his words, the material form of the text in which they were contained, and the contexts in which the text was accessed and discussed. Collegiality, closeness, and reciprocity were manifested and recursively reinforced by the use of the first-person voice, the deliberately plain materiality of the text-body, and the workaday contexts in which the text-body was accessed and its contents discussed. These actants were not separate components which formed an aggregate; they were a new entity, a thing which was different from, and not reducible to, its parts. A short consideration of the OE poem or speaking inscription known as *Thureth* usefully demonstrates this point.

Thureth

Thureth exists in only one manuscript (BL, Cotton MS Claudius A III, fol. 31). It is provisionally dated to the second half of the tenth century. The following version and translation are by Craig Ronalds and Margaret Clunies Ross:

Ic eom halgungboc; healde hine dryhten
 þe me fægere þus frætewum belegde.
 þured to þance þus het me wyrcean,
 to loue & to wurðe þam þe leoht gesceop.
 gemyndi is he mihta gehwylcre
 þaes þe he on foldan gefremian mæg,
 & him geþancie þeoda waldend
 þaes þe he on gemynde madma manega
 wyle gemearcian metode to lace.
 & he sceal ece lean ealle findan
 þaes þe he on foldan fremap to rihte.

(I am a benedictional; may the Lord protect him
 who thus decorated me beautifully with ornaments.
 Thureth gratefully ordered me to be made in this way
 in praise and in honour of Him who created the light.
 He [= Thureth] is mindful of all the mighty works
 which He [= God] is able to bring about on earth,
 and the Ruler of Nations shall reward him,
 because, mindful of many treasures,
 he wishes to designate (me) as an offering to the Lord.
 And he shall fully obtain eternal reward,
 Because he acts properly here on earth.)⁶²

62 Ronalds and Clunies Ross, “*Thureth*,” 360.

Thureth can be compared to the Verse Preface to the *Pastoral Care*. Both *Thureth* and the Verse Preface refer to themselves in the first-person voice. The Verse Preface to Wærferth's translation of Gregory's *Dialogues* does the same. This prompts the question—in these texts, who is talking?

Look Who's Talking

Ronalds and Clunies Ross argue that there is a distinction between *Thureth* and the Verse Prefaces. They argue that in *Thureth*'s case, the book is speaking, and in each of the Verse Preface to the *Pastoral Care* and Wærferth's Verse Preface, the text is speaking.⁶³ They do not justify that distinction. Orton makes a similar argument, albeit drawing the distinction between the Verse Preface to the *Pastoral Care* on one hand, and *Thureth* and Wærferth's Verse Preface on the other. Orton argues that the speaker in the Verse Preface to the *Pastoral Care* is Gregory's text, in its essential irreducible form.⁶⁴ He interprets the voice in *Thureth* as the linguistic communication, the contents of the benedictional.⁶⁵ However, the inscription explicitly states that *Thureth* does not earn an eternal reward by commissioning the production of a religious text, but by commissioning its gorgeous binding. Equally, paying for the beautiful ornamentation of a secular text would not bring him eternal reward. *Thureth*'s piety is materially manifested in the embellishment of *this specific text*. The reward stems from the union of materiality and meaning. The meaning of the words and its material form are not separate components which form an aggregate. They are a composite, a thing which is different from, and not reducible to, its parts.

Ronalds and Clunies Ross's, and Orton's, argument is based upon an anachronistic modern distinction between word-meaning and body. The distinction they draw does not allow for the early medieval understanding of the essential unity of the material object and the meaning of the words. Alfred's community was a presence culture, in which materiality and sensory perception participated in the revelation of meaning. Knowledge was accessed through the cooperative endeavour of mind and body.⁶⁶ The speaker in the Verse Preface to the *Pastoral Care* is a composite formed from the physical characteristics of the book (its materiality), the message it contained, the cultural norms which shaped the way that the text was accessed

⁶³ Ronalds and Ross, "*Thureth*," 369n49.

⁶⁴ Orton, "Deixis," 204.

⁶⁵ Orton, *Writing in a Speaking World*, 100.

⁶⁶ Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 79–86.

and understood—and the interplay between these actants. What speaks in the Verse Preface is the text-body. Likewise, in Wærferth's Verse Preface, the text-body speaks. The speaking object was a familiar experience for Alfred's community—another example of how sensory perception fused with intellect in the process of understanding. The Old English affinity for the speaking object was a cultural norm, a relational actant in the text-body of the *Pastoral Care* and the *Dialogues*.

Anglo-Saxon Speaking Objects

The Anglo-Saxons had a tradition of endowing riddles, poems, private objects, and public monuments with words delivered in the first-person voice, aimed directly at the listener or viewer and, sometimes, demanding a response.⁶⁷ As Benjamin Tilghman describes it, "Anglo-Saxons were subject to a cacophony of things constantly chattering about themselves."⁶⁸ Speaking objects date back to antiquity and are found scattered across the Mediterranean and up to the German-speaking regions.

There are between two hundred and three hundred extant Anglo-Saxon inscriptions, spatially and temporally very widely distributed.⁶⁹ A speaking object inscription is a distinct subset of inscriptions on items such as jewellery, coins, and weapons. An inscription conveys information. A speaking object inscription does this too, but speaks in the first-person voice and therefore lays claim to an identity, an individuality.⁷⁰ According to Peter Ramey, there are thirty Anglo-Saxon speaking object inscriptions, dated from the seventh to the eleventh centuries; according to Bredehoft, there are twenty-four.⁷¹ The most comprehensive compilation of Anglo-Saxon inscriptions is that by Elizabeth Okasha. References to her original list below are provided in parentheses.⁷²

Speaking object inscriptions are found on a range of objects, including jewellery (rings and brooches), prestige items (swords and scabbards), and monumental pieces (sundials and crosses). They are fashioned from a variety of materials: from leather to wood and bone, from precious metals

67 Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, 135–78; Bredehoft, "First Person Inscriptions," 104.

68 Tilghman, "Enigmatic Nature of Things."

69 Bredehoft, "First Person Inscriptions," 103; see Lenker and Kornexl, *Anglo-Saxon Micro-Texts*.

70 Ramey, "Writing Speaks," 343.

71 Ramey, "Writing Speaks," 342; Bredehoft, "First Person Inscriptions," 104.

72 Okasha, *Hand-list*.

to ornamental stonework. They speak in both Old English and Latin. However, the extant Anglo-Saxon record is dominated by inscriptions in the vernacular, on costly items.⁷³ The Jewel is one such speaking object inscription: “+ÆLFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN” (+Alfred ordered me to be made). The “me” is clearly neither reader nor speaker, but the object itself (and perhaps the book which accompanied it). Faulkner points out that if the Jewel’s rivet secured a pointer, then the beast would have a tongue, underlining the Jewel’s capacity to speak for itself.⁷⁴

The inscribed speaking object thus declared its own message directly to those listening and reading.⁷⁵ Ramey argues that speaking object inscriptions were a material form of speech. He uses Ursula Schaefer’s concept of the “vicarious voice” to illustrate how the inscribed voice emanated from the object itself, rather than the person who read the inscription out loud. The speaking object, provided with a voice, had the power to operate within human discourse and social relationships independently of its creator or owner. The Jewel’s inscription articulated a clear sense of identity: like the Cross in the *Dream of the Rood*, it “remembers where it came from.”⁷⁶ Ramey argues that direct speech is equated with power in OE literature.⁷⁷ Direct speech was a significant feature of OE poetry. While modern readers find such speeches awkward, contemporary audiences seem to have had different expectations and different ways of assimilating direct speech.⁷⁸ An extreme example of this agency is the speaking object inscription which pronounces a curse—a performative speech act. The early eleventh-century Anglo-Scandinavian silver brooch found on the Isle of Ely known as the Ædwen brooch (Okasha no. 114) contains the following curse, inscribed around the rim of the brooch on the reverse:

+ÆDVWEN ME AG AGE HYD DRIHTEN
DRIHTEN HINE AWERIE ÐE ME HIRE ÆTFERIE
BVTON HIO ME SELLE HIRE AGENES WILLES

(+Ædwen owns me, may the Lord own her. May the Lord curse him who takes me from her, unless she gives me voluntarily.)⁷⁹

73 Bredehoft, “First Person Inscriptions,” 105–06.

74 Faulkner, *Wealth*, 57.

75 Orton, “Deixis,” 207; Ramey, “Writing Speaks,” 336.

76 Faulkner, *Wealth*, 58.

77 Ramey, “Writing Speaks,” 336–37, 341–42.

78 Louviot, *Direct Speech*.

79 Okasha, *Hand-list*, 116–17.

The form of the curse, which operates only if the brooch is illicitly separated from its rightful owner, gives the fullest agency to the brooch to perform the curse, Ædwen being necessarily absent.⁸⁰ Another example, the gold Lancashire ring (Okasha no. 66), contains the inscription “+ÆDRED MEC AH EANRED MEC AGROF” (+Ædred owns me, Eanred engraved me).⁸¹ The inscription, in the first person voice, locates the object in a web of relationships, and thereby provides it with a specific identity.⁸² These examples can be contrasted with the ninth-century gold and nielloed ring (Okasha no. 245) which simply bears the word “+CYNEFRID+”—the inscription conveys information but does not speak.

The Anglo-Saxons may have been particularly receptive to speaking objects because of the widespread practice of reading aloud, of literacy as a public performance.⁸³ Bredehoft envisages that speaking object inscriptions in a community of limited literacy may have functioned in this way: there was a general understanding by those who could not read that an inscription was meaningful and could be voiced, and those who could not decipher the inscription usually had access to someone who could read out the inscription, give it voice. That is, there were pockets of literate individuals who acted as interpreters and facilitators for those around them. It follows that an inscribed object in a community of limited literacy such as Alfred’s Wessex imparted its message to most people orally. The inscriptions on larger monumental inscribed objects like the Ruthwell Cross may well have been memorized (sense for sense, rather than word for word) by the population living nearby, so that the inscription became a kind of cultural memory, particularly as people moved around their landscape.⁸⁴ People could respond to a text without being able to read it.⁸⁵

Alfred’s people were thus attentive to the thing, alert to its possible agency. That alertness stemmed from familiarity with the speaking object, and also drew upon early medieval understanding of texts. There was a peri-performative dimension to listening to text being read aloud, as there was to viewing images. Audience engagement, communal response, shaped the way text was read and understood.⁸⁶ Text-bodies could be powerful,

80 Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, 158.

81 Okasha, *Hand-list*, 89.

82 Ramey, “Writing Speaks,” 342–43.

83 Howe, “Cultural Construction.”

84 Bredehoft, “First Person Inscriptions,” 103–4.

85 Hamburger, *Script as Image*, 1.

86 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 67–91; Boulton, “End of the World.”

exert an influence. So, when the text-body talked, as the *Pastoral Care* and the *Dialogues* did, the audience was primed to listen and to absorb.

In this chapter, I started the analysis of Alfredian text-bodies by examining early medieval attitudes to the material and relational aspects of sacred texts and texts associated with authoritative religious figures. The early medieval text-body had a power which both religious and secular authorities acknowledged and harnessed. That power extended far beyond the persuasiveness of the meaning of the words written on the page. I then compared the text-bodies of the Alfredian translations with other Anglo-Saxon texts and with Carolingian texts. The difference in materiality is profound—deliberate and therefore meaningful. This comparison was the entry point for a consideration of the assemblage of the Alfredian text-body.

What then constitutes the assemblage which was the Alfredian text-body? Ideology certainly—ideology lay at the core of the Alfredian text-body. Ideology was necessary but not sufficient on its own to achieve the reorientation of Alfred's community back to God and avoid annihilation at the hands of the Vikings. I identified three incorporeal actants which were highly influential in the formation of the Alfredian text-body. The plain text-body, handleable and ready-to-hand, was an important actant. The use of direct speech, by "Alfred" in the Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care* and by the text-body in both the *Pastoral Care* and the *Dialogues*, was another actant. Direct speech interacted with the Anglo-Saxon cultural norm of attentiveness to the speaking object. These "pinged off" the early medieval culturally mediated belief in the power of certain text-bodies.

Was the assemblage apt for its persuasive purpose? In its materiality and relationality, the Alfredian text-body was apt to create a levelling effect, to draw king and elites together. It created a sense of shared enterprise, a communal endeavour. That levelling effect was accentuated by the use of the king's first-person voice in the Prose Preface to the *Pastoral Care*. Skilful use of early medieval and Anglo-Saxon cultural norms increased the likelihood that the audience would pay attention, listen, and absorb the ideology embedded in the text-bodies. The Alfredian text-body was carefully constructed to persuade Alfred's elites to opt in and to act. The text-body's handleability and the incorporation of prefaces which could be used as stand-alone pieces made it flexible for different contexts of collaborative learning, different textual communities. Alfred's people were more likely to listen to, agree with, and act upon the ideology contained in the Alfredian translations as a consequence of the agency of the Alfredian text-body. That agency emerges from the co-functioning of the elements of

Alfredian text-bodies. Alfredian text-bodies were an assemblage of actants which could “dance” with humans.⁸⁷

Human agency has taken a back seat in the present chapter, because I have used assemblage theory, with its flatter ontology. In the next chapter, humans take centre stage, as I use social practice theory to demonstrate that practices of “doing and saying” by Alfred’s magnates were powerful drivers of elite acceptance of Alfredian ideology. As with this chapter on text-bodies, I artificially isolate social practices in the lived experience of Alfredian reform, in order to demonstrate how they inculcated acceptance of Alfredian ideology and fostered the ethnic identity of the *Angelcynn*.

87 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 31.