

To readers

This textbook is designed for students for whom this is the first experience of the language of the earliest period of English, namely the period from the time of the invasions of Britain by the English in the fifth century until the time of the Norman Conquest or shortly thereafter. If it is undoubtedly true that the first sighting of the English of that time comes as a shock to most beginning students, there can be no doubt that an understanding of that language is essential for a proper appreciation of how English has evolved over time.

The approach taken here is somewhat different from that usually taken in introductory textbooks of Old English. Most such books offer a two-part solution, consisting, firstly, of a freestanding account of the grammar, and, secondly, a group of texts which the student is expected to read by reference to the relevant material in the grammar. The distinctive feature of this work is that I have attempted to present an integrated account, in which, for the most part, accounts of the linguistic history of Old English are immediately followed by relevant and exemplary texts. Given the scope of this work, this has meant that some traditional features have had to be omitted. For example, there are no complete texts, except in one special case, and of necessity the grammar sections are also not as full as those which some textbooks provide. On the other hand, alongside some features not usually present at this level, such as a discussion of dialectal material, the material presented here is intended to provide the amount of work which can sensibly be covered in one-term or one-semester courses of the kind common today.

I have deliberately omitted some features which are usually included; in particular there is at no point any extended discussion of phonology. There is no doubt that the student who wishes to take his or her study of Old English further will need, at that stage, to acquire a deeper knowledge of the phonological features of the language. But my own experiences suggest that too great an emphasis on phonology at a very early stage actually inhibits an understanding of other linguistic matters

and even of the reading of original texts. Also, unlike in the other texts in this series, there are no discussions of the exercises. This would have been pointless given that for the most part these exercises consist only of passages for translation.

Throughout this work I have tried, wherever appropriate, to relate Old English structures to those of the present day. The principal motivation for this is to demonstrate how much of the language has remained stable over time, rather than merely to assist the reader in his or her understanding of Old English. I am also aware that this work will often be used by readers whose first language is other than English, and therefore I have tried to relate Old English structures to those of our nearest relatives.

I owe a debt of gratitude to a variety of people. My thanks go to Heinz Giegerich, not merely for inviting me to write this work, but also for his helpful comments on the work as it progressed. Olga Fischer read the whole manuscript and suggested many improvements with her usual tact and intelligence. Some years ago I tested a small part of this work out on my students, and I am grateful to them for their responses at that time, as well as to my colleague Chris McCully for his valuable remarks on that first attempt. My thanks also go to my fellow authors Jeremy Smith and Simon Horobin for sharing their work on Middle English with me. Sarah Edwards, at Edinburgh University Press, has been incredibly patient with an author at whom she must have despaired, and I am grateful for her patience. In completing this work I have also benefited from the support of the Leverhulme Trust and their award of a Senior Research Fellowship, and for that support I am most grateful.

Finally, my sons have also read through parts of this work with an undergraduate's eye, and for that, and much more, I dedicate this book to them.

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