Scripta Neophilologica Posnaniensia. Tom XX, strony: 163–179
Wydział Neofilologii, Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 2020
DOI 10.14746/snp.2020.20.10

RUNES, OGHAM AND LATIN SCRIPTS: TRANSITION BETWEEN ORALITY AND LITERACY IN POST-ROMAN BRITAIN

JACEK MIANOWSKI

Abstract. Runic and ogham scrips are an important part of the heritage of the British Isles. While it is difficult to determine exactly where and when they were invented, and the contemporary consensus on this issue leaves many questions open, the importance of these writing systems in the oral-literate transition cannot be called into question. For these reasons, the following study has two aims. Firstly, it attempts to familiarise the reader with the historical background to the process of transition from orality to literacy. Secondly, it tries to allocate runes, ogham and Latin scripts within an anthropological perspective.

Key words: orality, literacy, cultural shift, runes, ogham, Latin

Introduction

The British Isles are endowed with a rich history of cultural and linguistic transformations. One of the most fundamental changes was the transition from orality to literacy among numerous ethnicities and cultures inhabiting Britain. The process, although gradual, and requiring several centuries to fully unwind, was also a time of experimenting with three distinctive writing systems: Anglo-Saxon runes, Celtic ogham and the Latin script. The following study attempts to gauge the scale of cultural changes in terms of oral-literate transition that took place at the threshold of the Roman period and the Early Middle Ages in England and Wales. The proposed perspective takes into consideration Anglo-Saxon and Welsh traditions as its main points of reference, framing the study within an anthropological scope. The purpose is to acquaint the reader with the concept of the transitory period itself and to provide a better understanding of the process of adapting new writing systems in the milieu of re-forging of English and Welsh ethnicities.

1. Germanic migration and settlement in Britain

The Anglo-Saxon settlement in the British Isles shaped the political situation which thrived until the early medieval period. The beginnings of the Anglo-Saxon invasions, taking place around the fifth century, were a period rich in historical events. De Baye (1893: 1–6) indicated that initial visits to the Isles carried out by Jutish, Saxon and Anglian tribes were organised as military excursions. The Jutes, who originated from present-day Denmark, concentrated their military interest in the south-eastern coastal regions of Britain, while one of the outcomes of their arrival was the establishing of the kingdom of Kent. The Saxons inhabited the areas surrounding the mouth of Rhine, also known as the base of the *Cimbric Chersonese*, which presently resembles the area of the Duchy of Schleswig, bordering between Denmark and Germany. The third group of invaders, the Angles, launched their mission from the southern parts of Schleswig.

The complexity of Germanic settlement in the Isles can be difficult to evaluate. One may consider archaeological evidence as the main, material residue of historical facts, yet these derive mostly, as Arnold (1997: 1–24) remarks, from the remains excavated from settlements and cemeteries. The exact reasoning behind the Germanic settlement of the Isles remains unclear. Much of the evidence may point to military or economic motivations as the main reasons for exodus. Even though seeking one's fortune as a mercenary was a frequent occupation in those times, the migration may be perceived as a conglomeration of smaller events, where the agrarian cooperation of Germanic immigrants and native inhabitants was not infrequent. It is noteworthy that there have been various shifts in terminology, with the notions of *invasion* and *immigration* appearing alternately throughout the twentieth-century literature on the subject. Moreover, migration into Britain is difficult to evaluate in terms of the number of migrants, their status, or to what extent their contacts with the native population were peaceful or violent. Arnold (1997: 23–24) also acknowledges that even though it may be possible to define the place of origin of individual settling tribes, the archaeological evidence dated to the fifth century is blurred in terms of specific traits that might have pointed to ethnic affiliation of settlers:

> (…) studies of early Anglo-Saxon metalwork and pottery are bedevilled by the difficulties of establishing the meaning of the distributions. For instance, the distinction between the colonisation of an area by a distinct ethnic group, (…) and the spread of a fashion visible throughout artefacts, may forever elude us. We should add to this the obvious problems that wearing of a diagnostic artefact does not necessarily prove the ethnic affiliation of its wearer and that the principal source of information available is the presence of diagnostic artefacts.

The presumable promotion of exchange throughout the settled tribes, along with the common Germanic background discernible in art and everyday use objects, may point to a different issue. The distributional patterns of archaeological finds, as suggested by Hines (1992a, 1992b, cited in Arnold 1997: 23–24), do not indicate any movement into northern or western regions immediately after settling on the British shores. What is more, the Germanic settlers blended with the native inhabitants of England and created new ethnicities in due course. From that viewpoint it may be stated that the distinction between Jutes, Angles and Saxons proves to be more troublesome than helpful. Moreover, Arnold (1997: 26) argues that after 550 A.D. the spread of fashion and constant exchange of goods seems to have balanced out, which may indicate either a stability of cultural exchange and a gradual blending of individual identities, or social control over the flow of fashions.

One of the conclusions concerning Germanic settlement in Britain is that even though the nature of the migration itself could have constituted a mixture of peaceful cooperation and violent military conquest, the period following the initial settlement reoriented the initial goals of the Germanic migrants. The centuries following the settlement seem to point to a period of a vast cultural blending not only between Saxon, Angle or Jutish ethnicities but also between Germanic settlers and native inhabitants. In this course of events, new ethnic identities were forged and it seems reasonable to conclude that referring to the population of the Isles, from around the middle of the fifth century, as Anglo-Saxon, instead of pinpointing individual, ethnic groups is justified.

2. Restructuring the pagan & Celtic identities in Wales

The Celtic migration began, most probably, around the onset of the first millennium B.C. with land cultivators and stockbreeders moving north of the ancient eastern civilisations. As was indicated by Berresford-Ellis (1992: 4–5), the more isolated Celtic territories were gradually curtailed, leaving the British Isles as one of the last bastions of Celtic culture. By the sixth century the mainland tribes were either eradicated or pushed back into the Isles, reforming as the nation of Brittany later on. The established belief is that due to Anglo-Saxon migration and conquest, the Celts were pushed further into the western outskirts of Britain, while the migration itself was not peaceful, leaving the Celts weakened. On the other hand, as suggested by Filppula, et al. (2002: 3–7), the Anglo-Saxon movements could not have taken place in the form of a mass ethnic cleansing, due to the small number of warrior tribes willing to claim land in the course of military conflict. The Germanic colonists were rather a minority in a vast space of Romano-British and Celtic inhabitants where cooperation might have proven more rewarding than bloodshed.

This issue remains unresolved and the nature of contacts between Anglo-Saxon and Celtic ethnicities was probably a mixture of both peaceful and violent elements, with warfare and cooperation occurring interchangeably. It should be borne in mind that although the nature of such contacts might have reflected its cultural outcome, it still allowed a certain degree of cultural equivalence and cultural lending, at least at the onset of Anglo-Celtic contacts in Britain.

Even though Christianity was a fundamental factor in the reshaping of cultural reality in England and Wales, the changes occurring in pre-Christian times also played a major role. It has to be borne in mind that a large share of knowledge concerning pre-Christian religious practices in the Isles derives from monastic sources, written down several centuries after the Anglo-Saxon conversion to Christianity. De Jong (2011: 172–173) remarks that building up the new Christian identity relied on drawing a clear division between the old, pagan ways and the new, enlightened path. Hence, it was not enough that the "pagan alien" was cast out of Christendom. Worshipping false gods, and upholding tenets which were foul and misleading in their essence, was reason enough for eternal condemnation. Even though the short period between Germanic settlement and the emergence of an Anglo-Saxon heptarchy still provides researchers with rich archaeological evidence, there is little consistency concerning actual religious practices. At the same time, the distinctive division into *before* and *after* the introduction of Christianity among Anglo-Saxons, which may be derived from monastic sources, provides a certain degree of understanding. The striking juxtaposition of these two milieus might indicate that the cultural conflict between *pagan* and *Christian* elements served as reinforcement for the new faith and was a convincing argument in discussions among religiously divided tribesmen. The success of religious debates was almost impossible without separating the two milieus and picturing one as inferior to the other.

3. The Roman perspective

The idea of the Roman order of the world can be viewed as a starting point for differentiating between barbaric and civilised nations. Borawska and Górski (1993: 39–41) observe that the fall of Roman civilisation did not leave the European world equally balanced in terms of cultural reorientation. The Italian Peninsula and its immediate surroundings, where the remaining representatives of the Gaulish, Venetian, Etruscan and Ligurian nations acknowledged the Latin language as their own, remained in opposition to the northern parts of the empire, ruled by Germanic and Celtic chieftains. Even though Roman culture was known in these remote parts, only the ruling, upper classes acknowledged Roman cultural superiority and adopted elements of a Mediterranean lifestyle. Rural areas and their inhabitants not only consciously remained outside the cultural reorientation, but also perceived their ethnic inheritance as the only imperative. Mistrust and a certain degree of animosity towards Roman culture were an attribute of Germanic tribes, venturing into the verges of the empire. Wood (2011: 208–209) suggests that identifying Germanic elements in early medieval culture is only possible in some archaeological discoveries. At the same time it can be argued that the appearance of Germanic settlers in an area of Roman civilisation might have awoken the pre-Roman traditions of Britain's native inhabitants. The *Latinisation* on the outskirts of the Roman world ran only as deep as the natives' ability and willingness to adapt to the new and distinctive lifestyle.

Even though the initial Romano-Celtic contacts were also characterised by periods of military strife, the overall impact of the Roman world on Celtic Britain had a different outcome. Celtic culture represented a rich and varied array of social organisation, where the division into warriors, druids and artists allowed a thriving existence. Singh (2005: 68–69) sees this contemporary perspective as non-dominant in Roman times. The vast network of trade connections between Wales, Brittany, western Scotland and continental Europe was one of the possible routes through which the Roman Empire got to know of the uncivilised, yet rich lands far up north. By launching an invasion in 55 B.C., Julius Cesar sought not only to stretch the borders of his dominion, but most probably came on behalf of an invitation to end ongoing mutual Celtic hostilities. The initial outcome of these contacts was a fierce Celtic resistance from 54 B.C. onwards. The balance of power shifted in favour of the Romans around 43 A.D. with Emperor Claudius' change of tactics and a thorough reorganisation of the Roman military presence in Britain. Within three years Claudius conquered the central and south-eastern Celtic-inhabited lands. Initially, Roman military presence was weak in Wales and Scotland, but Roman administration managed to establish itself firmly in present-day England. The Romanisation of Celtic lands proceeded on a wide scale, with rich archaeological evidence still being unearthed. By the third century, the Celtic kings, benefitting from good relations with Rome, started using Latin as the official language in court issues, while spoken and written Latin was a common practice. Finally, it is difficult to establish the degree of bilingualism among Celtic inhabitants, yet proficient usage of Latin and Brythonic and other native languages was a possibility (Singh 2005: 69).

4. Welsh political shifts

In terms of expansion, the Welsh frontier was difficult to handle. During the reign of Didius Gallus, the Roman army reinforced the Welsh border with a system of auxiliary fortifications. As indicated by Manning (2001: 13–16), strengthening the border was aimed at stopping any incursions into Roman-controlled areas. The second goal was to create a military basis for any future military expansions into Wales. Before 75 A.D. there were around twenty-one fortifications built along the border, which allowed a substantial increase in military stability. However military control was not a goal in itself. The Roman administration sought to gradually transfer control over Welsh lands into the hands of local leaders and establish a network of cities able to maintain political, military and economic independence. Such a structure was contradictory to the Celtic model, in which the tribal structure of political power favoured several, equally important smaller towns (Manning 2001: 49).

Around the fourth century Wales regained political independence and tribal kingdoms began to emerge. Redknap (1991: 8) argues that even though political relations started to form a compound paradigm, individual kingdoms sought to develop independently. Bearing in mind the scarcity of available evidence, it may be indicated that post-Roman Wales made little use of the imperial inheritance, as only terms describing administrative functions (St. Patrick's father was given the title *Decurio*), or occasional place-names (Gwent had retained the *civitas* name *Venta Silurum*) were incorporated into native languages. Christianity was another factor consolidating the existence of the Welsh kingdoms. Numerous Christian communities had been present in Roman Wales and they thrived even after the empire's decision to withdraw. Yet the most important aspect of this transitory period is the emergence and amalgamation of Christian stone monuments reflecting the political and religious changes taking place at that time. From the fifth century onwards, as Michelle P. Brown (2006: 64–650) remarks, commemorative inscriptions appeared not only in Wales, but became a part of tradition in Gaul, Iberia and North Africa. Moreover, the impact of the Roman presence on early medieval Welsh architecture was tremendous, which can be observed from the pattern of distribution of fortifications. The warlike character of politics in post-Roman Wales often resulted in internal power struggles. During the period from the fifth to seventh century, as Redknap (1991: 11) notes, settlements were raised on well-defended hilltops (*Dinas Powys*, *Degannwy*) and were often considered the seat of rulers.

The transitory period in Wales was a time of significant Irish migration. As observed by Powell (1980: 197–198), migration into south-west Wales, initiated at the end of the third century, brought colonists, known as *Dési*, who eagerly settled and plundered Welsh coasts. It has to be remembered that this transitory period presented also immense opportunities. The native Welsh population most probably welcomed the Roman withdrawal and gradually seized political control over the land. At the same time the Roman presence brought a certain degree of political stability and discouraged attempts at internal military conflicts. The transition itself allowed not only for a rebalancing of power, or the creation of independent Welsh states, but also provided means for the development of indigenous culture, art and language.

5. A radical change in visual arts

Art is one of the few elements of human activity and creativity that can leave traces reaching across time and space. George Henderson (2000: 9) observes that exceptional forms can resist erosion in time through the blending of juxtaposed elements. The post-Roman art of Britain reflects this concept in its very essence. It can be argued that the Romans, aside from various political or military ideas, introduced new ways of representing naturalistic forms. The Celtic tribes made use of these novelties and incorporated them into their ownartistic style. Hence, in presenting a head, a fundamental element of Celtic art changed significantly, and around the first century A.D. the antique styling can be differentiated within Celtic art. The deliberate attempts at upholding traditions on one hand, and assimilating new elements on the other are, as Henderson (2000: 27) concludes, the meaningful facets of early medieval art.

Starting with epic literature, the affection for richly encrusted possessions was one of the most remarkable features of the inhabitants of Britain. Widsith's necklace, awarded to him by King Hermanric, or Hrothgar's gifts for Beowulf are, as Henderson (2000: 37–46) notes, just two examples showing how precious material possessions sparked the post-Roman imagination. The value of particular items often served as a marker of its owner's power. The history behind particular items may reflect the degree of attachment to earthly possessions. Around 651, the Mercian King Penda forced the Northumbrian ruler, Oswy, to pay an enormous tribute for his release from captivity. This quarrel, involving not only treasures of untold value but also kingly honour, ended in bloodshed and left Oswy victorious and his treasures returned to him. A change of ownership of valuable possessions was a frequent practice in this period, with pieces of art moving northwards and southwards at intervals.

The area of Oswy's kingdom is also the place where the Sutton Hoo treasure was unearthed. The site of this discovery in Suffolk, as Henderson (2000: 46–47) remarks, indicates a place of a rich burial rather than a hoard of valuables. Placing the items in a thirty-metre-long boat and building a mount on top of it were just two elements of a tradition that reached Britain most probably from Sweden. Burial practices of this kind were common in Scandinavia throughout the 600s, with Uppsala, Vendel and Valsgärde as the most well-known sites. The ritual of Germanic burial, also discernible from the text of *Beowulf*, encompassed inserting various objects to denote the status, wealth or the role in life of the deceased. Inserting the now-famous encrusted helmet found at Sutton Hoo, or a variety of precious swords and other weaponry, was supposed to indicate the military background of the deceased. In this particular aspect, as Henderson (2000: 48–51) observes, swords were the element most suggestive of a warrior's burial. Remaining a valued possession, and usually passed down from father to son, swords were the weapon denoting not only wealth, but also social status. Not all members of a war band were equally equipped; bearing a sword may have indicated a leading role within a particular group of warriors. The Sutton Hoo sword, richly decorated with valuable stones, was a hallmark of the Germanic style in the visual arts of the early medieval period.

The early Christian tradition of Celtic burial in Britain also relied on symbolism. An early cemetery located in Arfryn, Anglesey indicates how important mutual relations were in small Christian communities. As Peter Lord (2003: 22–23) writes, over ninety graves were arranged around a central element, which turned out to be a single grave. Above it stood a tombstone dedicated to *Ercagni*, most probably the founder of the community. Its presence could have been a place of worship, or possibly a shrine. Graves of important individuals in this tradition usually contained bronze or iron bells, a practice also common in the Welsh tradition. Moreover, such artefacts were often modified with ornamental markings or precious stones added with the passing of time, as the local myth of a saint's deeds spread and gathered new believers.

The visual arts of early medieval Britain blended Germanic components and Roman aesthetics. The medieval novelties, as Salisbury (2009: 49) states, included not only a high awareness of proportion, weighing of colours or an immense use of symbolism. Art of that period was made to serve a higher purpose, or more specifically, to reinforce Christian beliefs. The post-Roman period allowed the inhabitants of Britain to experiment with the Germanic tradition of intricate patterns in religious objects or illuminated manuscripts. Henderson's (2000: 52) account takes also into consideration the lay ingredients in style. *The Book of Durrow*, dated to the eighth century, features several aspects that may be attributed as Germanic. Decorative ornaments on illuminated fibulas, created with obvious precision, or the image of an eagle, served the same purpose as the rich ornaments on Sutton Hoo helmet – to endorse the faith and prove the skill of their creators. Mixing Roman styles with Germanic or Irish elements gave birth to a distinguished illuminating tradition. *The Book of Durrow*, *the Lindisfarne Gospels*, or *Book of Kells* are merely three examples of artistic craftsmanship in Britain. In Henderson's (2000: 56, 62) opinion, the manuscript from Lindisfarne, dated to around 698, surpassed its continental counterparts in terms of precision. Undoubtedly, the book represents the peak of artistic and cultural development in early-medieval Britain, and, as Michelle P. Brown (2003: 1) observes, "[i]ts pages exude a passion, an energy and a thoughtful, receptive commitment to an earnestly held purpose, a higher ideal, which speaks of the very best of human aspiration." The artistic style that developed in Britain became well known in Carolingian Europe and played a role in restoring antique traditions on the continent.

6. Emergence of a new poetic tradition

The poetic tradition of Britain might have begun as early as the migration period itself. Even though the ethnic awareness of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic tribes was alive throughout Roman times, the emergence of distinctive poetical practices can be correlated with the diminishing influence of the empire. A great proportion of information concerning the languages of those times comes from later periods, but fortunately, from written sources. It was indicated by Even though there might be a rich collection of non-linguistic evidence, it is difficult to determine on that basis a multifaceted image of spoken language. Moreover, the range of available Old English texts may provide an indication of formal language use, but it cannot serve as a foundation for a constructive image of speech communities. It may be argued that the methodology applied from this perspective is unlikely to take into consideration the nature of speech communities as such, and that extending the scope of evidence may prove to be a necessary step (Singh 2005: 75).

The Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition originated in the Germanic cultural milieu. The Germanic heritage was a strong bond-making factor as it often made it possible to put aside pagan-Christian animosities. Fred C. Robinson (2008: 435) suggests that both the Anglo-Saxon bishop Boniface and the scholar Bede expressed a similar belief that the pagan ancestry of Englishmen, even though culturally and religiously distanced from Christianity, was something one should not be ashamed of. Pride in their Germanic ancestry is a common feature in almost each and every archetype of Anglo-Saxon poetry. This idea of "intertribal kinship" is discernible, in the poem *Widsith*, whose protagonist clearly expresses his fascination with the Germanic heroic age (Malone 1962:112; after Robinson 2008: 435).

Anglo-Saxon poetry retains a high degree of homogeneity. Aside from the cultural milieu, there is a large degree of recurrence in the syntax, metrical system or even similar poetic formulas. According to Robinson (2008: 435–436), comparing fragments of *Beowulf* with the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* and the Old Saxon *Heliand* not only reveals such mutual relations, but also may be the reason why some scholar believed that mutual intelligibility between Germanic languages was possible. The degree of recurrence in formulaic patterns among Germanic languages remains a puzzling feature. Expressing the idea of killing someone, as Robinson (2008: 436) notes, was conveyed through a poetic phrase of *becoming a slayer to*. Moreover, this particular formulaic pattern can be observed not only in Anglo-Saxon *tōbananwurde*, but also in Old Icelandic *at banaverða*. This led Robinson (2008: 436) to conclude that "[f]rom this kind of evidence it becomes clear that the Old English, Old Saxon, Old High German and Old Icelandic poets were not only adhering to a common metrical form but also drawing on the same Germanic thesaurus of poetic formulae." At the same time Robinson (2008: 439) observes that since the initial studies on the recurrence of formulaic patterns across Germanic languages it has been acknowledged that formulas could not have been the only source of poetry and that correlations between oral and literate domains were possible.

It can be argued that oral poetry, while being an integral part of language, undergoes constant development. One of the factors that had a tremendous impact on the evolution of the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition was the introduction of Christianity. In his thorough analysis of this process, Eric Gerald Stanley (2000: 10) pointed to the changing reception of Anglo-Saxon poetry:

> [s]cholars from the first half of the nineteenth century to the present day have followed, in varying degrees of ferocity, Grimm's relatively mild disparagement of the Christian element in the extant Germanic poetry. Throughout, the assumption is made, explicitly or implicitly, that whatever was not touched by Christianity, whatever remained purely Germanic, purely pagan, was more original and more glorious.

Yet the nature of this crucial change should not be limited to a pagan-Christian quarrel over cultural superiority. Even though Christian motifs played a major role in developing the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition, pagan principles were an integral element of the religious conversion process and thus imbued into all instances of art, including poetry. The blending of Germanic tradition, focused around heroism and epic storytelling, with Christian principles became a common practice despite the initial discord between pagan and Christian milieus. Thus, as Jeff Opland (1980: 33–35) remarks, it is possible to relate *Beowulf*, an epitaphic story constructed as a typical Anglo-Saxon oral performance from pre-Christian times, with Cynewulf, a converted literate poet, who developed a practice of constructing runic puzzles. These examples provide a perfect combination of Germanic heritage, demonstrated both in *Beowulf*'s performative character and Cynewulf's poetry, woven within the milieu of literacy. Finally, the transition to the Anglo-Saxon poetic milieu may be perceived from two perspectives, the first including a pagan-Christian discord, the second one being the oral-literate shift.

Welsh poetic tradition of the Early Middle Ages also remains a rich source of knowledge on linguistic practices. It is worth noting that some scholars (cf. Powell 1980: 183–184, Davies 1999: 10–11) advise caution when dealing with sources preceding the written ones, as pre-manuscript evidence is scarce and circumstantial. Aside from the evidence of inscribed stone monuments or second-hand accounts of Roman scribes concerning Welsh social hierarchy, one can rely solely on the earliest Welsh written sources. The three most accepted sources of knowledge on Welsh poetic tradition, as Janet Davies (1999: 11–15) writes, include the poetic tradition of *Y Cynfeirdd*, as well as *The Law of Hywel Dda*, written down between 1230 and 1500, and *The Mabinogion*, a collection of prose stories. *Y Cynfeirdd*, being a contemporary term for the poetic tradition of the period from the sixth to eleventh centuries, incorporates the stories of Aneirin and Taliesin, song singers composing around 580–595. Both names appear also in *Historia Brittonum*, and both these authors were declared to be the initiators of the Welsh poetic tradition, despite their ties to *Yr Hen Ogledd*(The Old North), which geographically and politically remained outside Welsh influence. *The Law of Hywel Dda* was a collection of traditional Welsh laws which did not survive in their original form. Davies (1999: 14) remarks that its codified version may indicate that the political situation of Wales in the early medieval period was rather turbulent, requiring a vast range of regulations in order to resolve violent disputes. *The Mabinogion*, encompasses eleven Welsh tales, four of which stand out in terms of composition. The tales were written down several centuries after their creation and can point to a rich oral tradition in early medieval Wales. Sioned Davies (2007: ix–xiii) remarks that no names of authors are provided, suggesting that the sense of ownership was of little importance at that time. These three instances of the Welsh poetic and literary tradition maintain strong ties to their oral heritage. By the end of the eleventh century, as Janet Davies (1999: 14–15) notes, the appearance of a rich spectrum of literary works made Welsh a multifaceted and well-developed language with the longest European tradition of storing knowledge in formulas. While retaining its Celtic character in syntax and vocabulary, Welsh made use of borrowings from English and Latin and remained a strong vernacular language even after the political changes brought about by the Battle of Hastings in 1066.

Developing a rich poetic tradition has several consequences. For one, it establishes that a community is able to acquire and store knowledge in the form of formulas. Moreover, a given community is able to process large quantities of cultural information and such data has a fundamental meaning for the coherence and ethnic identity of a given society. Secondly, both the Anglo-Saxon and Welsh poetic traditions developed separately, and each managed to become an integral and fundamental element of everyday reality. Epic storytelling or a formulaic grasp of law are just a few examples of manifesting what a given culture considers important. Externalising moral principles, the value of honour or denoting the importance of lawfulness prove more than that a given society made a major cultural breakthrough. Being able to process such concepts, abstract in their nature and often odd to a casual observer, may indicate readiness to adopt a written means of storing information.

7. Orality and literacy in the British Isles

Orality and literacy may be perceived as social practices. Even though it has been established that both these concepts remain somewhat in opposition, the problem can be understood quite differently. Williams (2004: 576–577) noted that literacy studies may be gauged from a "broad" and a "narrow" perspective. The purpose of the current research fits into the former definition, which underlines the importance of social practices in the field of anthropology. In this view all literacy practices carry meaning in terms of human behaviour. The historical perspective that deals with the earliest instances of writing in Britain ought to take into consideration the very nature of literacy in post-Roman Britain. Briggs (2010: 482) argues that terms such as *literacy*, *reading*, or *writing* should not be applied in accordance with their contemporary understanding. Literacy is both a skill possessed by an individual and a formation of mentality particular to a place and time. At the same time Briggs (2010: 484) rightly observes that "(…) the Middle Ages was given the minor role of either postscript or prehistory, a vast grey area perceived through a congeries of generalizations.”

The oral mnemonics of Anglo-Saxon and early Welsh poetry were probably close to the theoretical model of Walter Ong (2002), whereas tale singers did not memorise songs forged by other authors and relied on a universal repertoire, accessible and known to all members of the entourage. It was also indicated that the formulaic-based storytelling tradition was well known to virtually all Germanic peoples long before their appearance in Britain. Magoun (1953: 447–458) underlines however that the poetic tradition went into decline after the Norman Conquest, possibly due to the linguistic, cultural and political changes that followed the Norman military victories.

8. Oral traces in writing

It should be borne in mind that even though the decline of the Anglo-Saxon oral poetic tradition may be attributed to political factors which emerged after 1066, much of the oral character of data transmission was embedded already within early Christian works. This mechanism was observed by John D. Schaeffer (1996: 1134–1135) in Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*. To Schaeffer, Augustine’s treaty was not written for the mere purpose of instructing clerics. In essence, the fourth-century work aimed to provide suggestions on the extemporal delivery of sermons. The work might have not reached a wide audience when one considers the degree of literacy in the fourth century. The estimates provided by William V. Harris (1989: 272, cited in Schaeffer 1996: 1136) point to less than ten per cent of the population in the western provinces being able to read or write. Schaeffer (1996: 1136) also explains that early Christian churches taught the scriptures through an oral interpretation of a written text. Thus reading aloud was accompanied by rich gesturing, chanting or shifting intonation in order to add a sense of rhythm to the process. Finally, *De Doctrina Christiana* sought to deal with the late antique confusion of people who were unable get direct access to the teachings which they could only hear during sermons.

9. Runes and their *magical* background

The relationship between the religious milieu and writing was also observed by Ralph W. V. Elliott (1957: 250–251) in his research of Germanic runic magical practices. Elliot establishes that the relation between Germanic runic graphemes and magical-ritualistic practices might have stemmed from a tradition which attributed the yew tree with magical properties. Inscribing runic graphemes on a piece of yew wood was intended to enhance the desired magical result. Furthermore, the source of the grapheme-magical relation concept derives from the Celtic milieu, where the yew tree was also attributed magical powers, and this might have also constituted a source of the Anglo-Saxon magical tradition. To Elliott (1957: 253–254) the Germanic-Celtic contacts which may have resulted in transferring the ritualistic concepts of yew magic originated either during the Migration Period on the continent, or through influential relations between Anglo-Saxon settlers and druidic circles in Britain:

> [i]t may well be that the Celtic practice of using yew wood inscribed with ogham for magic or divinatory purposes was copied by the pagan Anglo-Saxon invaders, who would naturally use runes. Unless one subscribes to the view that ogham script derives from runes, there are no chronological objections to this view, if we accept Professor Jackson's[1] suggestion that the ogham alphabet was invented in Romano-Celtic Britain in the late fourth century.

Elliott's perspective not only allows considering a numerous contacts between Germanic and Celtic tribes, but also suggests that a particular instance of ritualistic-religious practices was borrowed between the two cultures, each using a separate writing system. Finally, Elliott (1957: 259–260) concludes that the impact of yew magic on the development of runic writing was substantial and its traces are discernible even within Old English Christian manuscripts containing medical remedies, which eventually substituted pagan charms in terms of invocations, but left the concept and ritualistic ambit untouched.

10. Towards textuality of the medieval world

It was Judith Jesch (1998: 462) who suggested that the inscriptions on stone monuments dated to the late Viking Age may be perceived as markers of textuality. Jesch claims that elaborate runic inscriptions contain meaning not only in the text itself, but also in "(…) the very materiality of these monuments that preserve those words; and (…) that the inscriptions represent a crucial point in the encounter between orality and literacy in which we are able to trace the crucial significance of both these practices." The Ågersta stone in Uppland contains elements of two kinds. As Jesch (1998: 463–465) observes, the inscription not only mentions the commissioner of the monument, the statement of commission, the commemorated as well as his family ties, but also adds information on where he lived and a deictic formula concerning the place where the stone was to be raised. Moreover, the monument contains extra-textual information that one can deduct from its physical attributes.

---

[1] Kenneth H. Jackson, 1953: 152, *Language and History in Early Britain*, p. 152. Edinburgh University Press, cited in Elliott 1957: 254.

The stone carver intentionally used granite, the most resilient stone material known in those days and, at the same time, most difficult to work with. The place of erection may be an indication of a boundary between two farms, thus extending the application of the monument. Finally, the stone is artfully decorated, a practice denoting that a huge amount of resources was necessary to raise it. The arrangement of rune lines, along with the decorations, make the stone difficult to read, which also may point to its artistic and extra-textual value rather than the importance of the inscription's content. Finally, Jesch (1998: 467) notes that,

> [b]ecause the Ågersta stone makes explicit what is only implicit in other inscriptions, it serves as an icon of the transition to literacy in a society which had previously been primarily oral. While the use of runes goes back to the second century A.D. in Scandinavia, so the phenomenon of literacy is not in itself new, the number of runic inscriptions rises dramatically in the late tenth and eleventh centuries. This may in part be an effect of random preservation, but I am convinced that it also results from the growth of a new type of literacy, a social literacy where written texts begin to take over some of the functions previously reserved for oral texts.

A perspective which underlines not only the textual dimension of a given monument or artefact, but takes into consideration its extra-textual features can make for a sound approach in researching early medieval instances of writing. At this point, two issues demand explanation. Firstly, when one considers the period in which the Ågersta stone was raised, it may be argued that the earliest instances of writing in Britain, emerging as much as six centuries earlier than the Ågersta monument, were preserved in a similarly accessible and well-preserved form. Secondly, it also has to be remembered that even though there may still be well-preserved instances of writing, their textual contents, as opposed to their extra-textual features, may seem rather inchoate.

Sims-Williams (2006: 15) pointed to a popular, yet highly disputed approach that the lack of historical evidence for early Welsh literacy is attributed to various conspiracy theories. The quantity of surviving manuscripts, as opposed to the alleged rich Welsh written tradition, is a result of various political endeavours of English kings, Viking pillagers or the overzealousness of the Reformation. This "romantic" perspective, as Sims-Williams (2006: 16) calls it, results from the lack of exact tracing of the origins of Celtic oral tradition. The scarceness of evidence in terms of manuscripts, as well as the complexity of ogham writing allows taking into account the available circumstantial sources. As Sims-Williams (2006: 17) notes, Caesar's account of druidic literacy does not take into consideration that druids were illiterate. In fact, it is quite possible that they were fluent in the use of Greek script, also in those areas of knowledge which remained outside their usual discipline. In terms of writing use that remained outside of scholastic or religious purposes Sims-Williams (2006: 24–25) shares the view of Robert Rees Davies (1987: 111–112) that writing in Wales was primarily used for functions other than keeping records until the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. Even though there was a tradition of writing charters in Latin while applying distinctive Celtic formulas, or instances of law records written with a mixture of Welsh and Latin, yet beyond such "professional" applications Welsh society relied heavily on oral means of storing important data until around the mid-thirteenth century.

Aside from the Welsh manuscript tradition, some degree of literacy may be found within the earliest instances of writing found in Wales. Even if the ideas of Patrick Sims-Williams and Robert Rees Davies are justified, they do not take into consideration the rich, pre-Christian tradition of ogham writing. The contrasting differences between the usage of ogham and Latin scripts, especially in the case of their practical application or the degree of literacy of their users, should be taken into consideration. It is unlikely that ogham writing was used in the same circumstances, for the same reasons and using the same materials as the Latin writing of the manuscripts. At the same time taking into consideration the pre-Christian tradition of ogham or runic scripts may allow us to construct a preliminary model of early medieval literacy. It should be remembered that all factors, peculiarities or properties of a given instance of writing – textual or extra-textual in their nature – carry cultural and linguistic information that can be interpreted.

11. Conclusion

Constructing a model of cultural change is a complex task. If one wishes to address the notion of oral-literate transition, several concerns ought to be addressed. In the milieu of orality and literacy in the British Isles, the first aspect worth addressing is the chronology and time span of changes. The pre-Christian era in Britain, understood as the period of Roman military and political dominance in Celtic Wales and as the period of migration and settlement of Germanic tribes in England, provides a broad perspective for further study, especially in view of the cultural and linguistic practices focused around the usage of writing. The Germanic-Celtic paradigm of changes, with two separate instances of cultural development, may provide a valuable base of evidence in terms of the oral character of the period, represented by a vast range of poetic, legislative or storytelling traditions, and bearing in mind the surviving exponents of visual arts. The literate aspect draws on the aforementioned tradition of storing knowledge in formulaic form, yet it pays a special attention to the most rudimentary attempts of introducing a script. Both Anglo-Saxon settlers and early Welsh inhabitants of Britain demonstrated a high degree of awareness and sophistication in terms of understanding ideas of cultural unity. Even if one puts aside the actual form of a given inscription, the first attempts at inscribing monuments or objects of everyday use may demonstrate that a given society has begun to reveal the willingness and readiness to join the world of written communication. Finally, it can also be argued that these changes reached their apex at the time of Christian conversion.

References

Arnold, C.J. 1997. *An archaeology of the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms*. London/New York: Routledge.

Berresford-Ellis, P. 1992. *Celtic inheritance*. London: Constable.

Borawska, T. and K. Górski. 1993. *Umysłowość średniowiecza*. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Pax.

Briggs, C.F. 2010. "Literacy, reading and writing in the medieval west". In: Roberts, J. and P. Robinson. (ed.). *The history of the book in the West: 400AD–1455,* Volume 1. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited. 481–504.

Brown, M.P. 2003. *The Lindisfarne gospels. Society, spirituality and the scribe*. London: The British Library.

Brown, M.P. 2006. *How Christianity came to Britain and Ireland*. Oxford: Lion Hudson.

Davies, R.R. 1987. *Conquest, coexistence and change: Wales 1063–1415,Vol. 2*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Davies, J. 1999. *The Welsh language. A pocket guide.* Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Davies, S. 2007. (ed.). *The Marbinogion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

De Baye, J. 1893. *The industrial arts of the Anglo-Saxons.*London: Swan Sonnenschein and co.

De Jong, M. 2011. "Religia". In: McKitterick, R. (ed.). *Wczesne średniowiecze.* Warszawa: Świat Książki. 155–193.

Elliott, R.W.V. 1957. "Runes, yews and magic". *Speculum* 32.2. 250–261.

Filppula, M., Klemola, J. and H. Pitkänen. 2002. *The Celtic roots of English*. Joensuu: University of Joensuu, Faculty of Humanities.

Harris, W.V. 1989. *Ancient literacy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Henderson, G. 2000. *Wczesne średniowiecze.* Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Hines, J. 1992a. "The Scandinavian character of Anglian England: an update". In: Martin O. and H. Carver. (eds.). *The age of Sutton Hoo*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press. 315–329.

Hines, J. 1992b. "The seriation and chronology of Anglian English women' graves: a critical assessment". In: Jørgensen, L. (ed.). *Chronological studies of Anglo-Saxon England, Lombard, Italy and Vendel-period Sweden*. Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, Institute of Prehistoric and Classical Archaeology. 81–93.

Jackson, K.H. 1953. *Language and history in early Britain. A chronological survey of the Brittonic languages, first to twelfth century A.D.*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Jesch, J. 1998. "Still standing in Ågersta: textuality and literacy in late Viking-age rune stone inscriptions". In: Düwel, K. and S. Nowak. (eds.). *Runeninschriftenals Quelleninter disdizplinärer Forschung. Proceedings of the fourth international symposium on runes and runic inscriptions in Göttingen, 4–9 August 1995.* Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter. 462–475.

Lord, P. 2003. *Medieval Wales (the visual culture of Wales).* Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Magoun, F.P. 1953. "Oral-formulaic character of Anglo-Saxon narrative poetry". *Speculum* 28.3. 446–467.

Malone, K. (ed.). 1962. *Widsith. A study in Old English heroic legend.* Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger.

Manning, W. 2001. *Roman Wales. A pocket guide*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Ong, W. 2002. *Orality and literacy: the technologizing of the word.* London/New York: Routledge.

Opland, J. 1980. “From horseback to monastic cell: the impact on English literature of the introduction of writing”. In: Niles, J.D. (ed.). *Old English literature in context*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer. 30–43.

Powell, T. and G. Eyre. 1980. *The Celts*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Redknap, M. 1991. *The Christian Celts. Treasures of late Celtic Wales*. Cardiff: National Museum of Wales.

Robinson, F.C. 2008. “The Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition”. In: Momma, H. and M. Matto. (eds.). *A companion to the history of the English language.* Malden, Mass./Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. 435–444.

Salisbury, J.E. 2009. “Europe”. In: Salisbury, J.E. and J.L. Fitzsimmons. (eds.). *The Greenwood encyclopaedia of global medieval life and culture. Volume I: Europe and the Americas.* Westport, CT/London: Greenwood Press. 1–178.

Schaeffer, J.D. 1996. “The dialectic of orality and literacy: the case of Book 4 of Augustine’s De doctrina Christina”. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)* 111.5. 1133–1145.

Sims-Williams, P. 2006. “The uses of writing in early medieval Wales”. In: Pryce, H. (ed.). *Literacy in medieval Celtic societies*.Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 15–38.

Singh, I. 2005. *The history of English. A student’s guide*. London: Hodder Education.

Stanley, E.G. 2000. *Imaging the Anglo-Saxon past. The search for Anglo-Saxon paganism and Anglo-Saxon trial by jury*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.

Williams, E. 2004. “Literacy studies”. In: Davies, A. and C. Elder (eds.). *The handbook of applied linguistics*. Malden,Mass./Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. 576–603.

Wood, I. 2011. “Kultura”. In: McKitterick, R. (ed.). *Wczesne średniowiecze.* Warszawa: Świat Książki. 194–231.