

Around 1000 – A look at Aelfric’s Colloquay and beyond

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Shire of Wurmwald, Middle Kingdom, Known World

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Starting point

My persona, Oswyn, is a 10th century Englishman (we would say Anglo-Saxon) during the reign of Edgar the Peaceable. My persona is about 100 years after Alfred the Great made his reforms or around 960 AD. The Danelaw area has been reconquered for the second time and there are no more “Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.” All of the rulers are now subjects of the King of England. Wales and Scotland have sworn that King Edgar was their overlord but that wouldn’t last long. This is the time period I am discussing today. The Colloquay was written around ~1000 AD. Things do change in 40 years but it should be close enough to give us some thoughts on what life was like.

Aelfric and his Colloquay

Aelfric of Eynsham was a Benedictine monk who became an Abbot in Dorset and finally Eynsham. He wrote several works but his most famous is the Colloquay on Occupations. It was written in Old English

as a primer to teach his monks and young pupils Latin. Much like a modern primer, it uses small vignettes to teach vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. In the Colloquy, Aelfric “talks” to various tradesmen about their professions. As a result, we can glean some information on what life was like around the year 1000.

Since it is in both Old English and Latin, it also serves as one of the first documents that allows us to know what some Old English words are.

Aelfric writes conversations with the following people: a monk, a ploughman, a shepherd, an oxherd, a hunter, a fisherman, a birdcatcher, a merchant, a tanner, a salter, a baker, a cook, a lawyer, then finally the group of boys he is “teaching.”

Food

Looking at the Colloquy, we see many of the people are involved in procuring food.

We can see from the shepherd that the English at this time had milk, butter, and cheese. The translation I have says sheep/ewes in particular so this is sheep’s milk, sheep’s butter, and sheep’s cheese. They ate deer, bear, goats, and rabbits, as the hunter tells us. They ate eels, pike, minnows, trout, and lampreys. Occasionally, there would be herring, salmon, dolphins, sturgeon, oysters, crabs, mussels, lobsters, and whales. The variety of birds is not mentioned though the use of decoys suggests waterfowl for sure. Salt is highly prized. Bread is a staple. While the types of vegetables are not listed, it is clear from several speeches that the ploughman is highly prized as it is he who grows the vegetables that are a large part of their diet (see pages 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10 of the Colloquy handout).

How is the food procured?

The work of the ploughman, shepherd, and oxherd is fairly straight forward.

Hunting appears to be primarily by nets. The hunter places nets in suitable places and uses hounds to drive the game into the nets. He then cuts the throats of those beasts entangled in those nets.

Likewise, the fisherman and fowler generally use nets.

All three also use other methods. The hunter sometimes stands and has his hounds drive the game to him. The fisherman also uses baskets. The fowlers also uses hawks.

Who works for whom?

The ploughman specifically says that he is not free and works for his lord. Likewise, the oxherd and shepherd work for a lord. The ploughman also has a boy who helps him drive the oxen.

The hunter specifically says he works for the King, not just a lord. Whatever he catches is for the King and the King gives him back food, clothes, a horse, and armor.

The fisherman seems to be a freeman. He sells his catch to the townsfolk.

The fowler also seems to be a freeman. He is able to willingly trade his birds if he desires and frequently releases them and trains new ones.

From what can be seen, the rest of the tradesmen work in town and are also free.

Over all, this reinforces what we know; the lower classes are tied to the land. In this time, one can certainly be a free farmer as well.

Interestingly, the cook is presented with a question on whether his skills are needed (see page 10 of the Colloquay handout). His reply is that without his skills, everyone would end up being a cook and no one would be a lord. Plus, because being a good cook takes lots of equipment, the cook has access to several worthy acquaintances. It is very likely that the cook is for a manor or the monastery. The lower classes would have to cook for themselves.

Anglo-Saxon slavery.

The Ploughman is not free. He is a slave. Anglo-Saxon slavery is different than what we in America think of as slavery. Even if it is not the same, please do keep in mind that even this type of slavery could be brutal. In Anglo-Saxon times, you could be a slave through warfare (you were taken prisoner), you could have been bought as a slave (usually from a Viking; probably Irish or Welsh descent), or you could sell yourself (and/or your family) into slavery. Why would you do this? By agreeing to be someone's slave, they take on your tax burden and they are now responsible to house you, feed you, and clothe you. You owe them your labor, above and beyond what you might owe your landlord because you were renting land. If you can't make your taxes or there is a situation like famine or drought, you might consider becoming a slave so these are someone else's problem. The law codes still assign you a worth. It is not the same amount as a freeman but it is about the same worth as a cow, which is still a large sum. Alfred's law code even says there are certain days of the year where your labor is your own and not your owner's¹. You can work for yourself or someone else for money or make things to sell for your own benefit on those days. It is not uncommon for owners to free their slaves periodically, often at Easter or upon their death. It is even possible to buy one's freedom back. Since you look like everyone else, you were generally treated better and your status is not necessarily readily apparent.

What is needed to cook?

The cook lists, blacksmiths, farriers, goldsmiths, silversmiths, bronzesmiths, woodworkers, and other skilled craftsmen as his acquaintances. Some are probably customers but others are likely support. Someone needs to make the pots and utensils. Someone needs to make the service that the meal is served on. Someone needs to bring the raw materials from the fields or markets to the cook.

Also, notice the salter and baker. No one can enjoy their meals without the salt and bread these provide.

¹ excerpt of Ælfred's Laws from Alfred the Great, translated by Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge

When do people work?

The Colloquy does not give a particular time of year. Several people mention the cold. The ploughman, his driver, and the shepherd are all up at first light.

There is no mention of most of the other workers.

The tanner mentions that no one would care to spend the winter without his skills.

The oxherd starts his day at night. He is to guard the oxen while they are out to pasture at night. Likewise, several of the boys are up late as they were singing psalms or tending in the infirmary.

Who sells what?

Most of the townspeople engage in trade of some kind.

The fisherman sells his catch.

The merchant says he travels to faraway lands and comes back with goods to sell. He brings purple cloth and silks, precious stones and gold, other cloths and dyes, wine and oil, ebony and brass, tin and brimstone, and glass. Interestingly, it is not mentioned that he is just selling these to the elite though that will be his most likely customer.

The tanner sells shoes, baskets, clogs, boots, buckets, bridles, harness, flasks, bottles, spurs, halters, bags, and purses.

The blacksmith makes ploughshares, harpoons/spears, scissors, and needles. He clearly makes nails too as he ribs the carpenter about being nothing without his work.

What is dangerous?

Several of our people mention things that are dangerous.

The hunter knows that hunting without a net is dangerous but brave so he does it sometimes anyway.

The fisherman knows he can get a good price for whale if he helps catch one but whaling is very dangerous as it can kill many people at once.

Trading overseas is dangerous since pirates and shipwrecks are common.

Other interesting bits

The lawyer (see page 10 of the Colloquay handout) was mediating a conversation between the blacksmith, and carpenter about the best secular profession. He suggests they put the argument behind them and go to the ploughman's house since he will have food and fodder. This is interesting because the ploughman is not free and because the ploughman is who the lawyer said was most important.

The lawyer also looks down on the blacksmith. You give us nothing but "shining steel and the noise of clanging hammers and puffing bellows."

The fowler finds it easier to tame new hawklings than to feed the adult ones through the summer.

The merchant brings in tin from overseas and we know England was known for its tin.

The fisherman has no trouble selling his catch "I cannot catch as many as I can sell."

The boys want to be wise. Aelfric offers, do they want to be "cunning or skilled in many types of begging" or "skilled in speaking or clever in poetry" or other options that lead to jealousy. They finally reply that they want to be simple men without hypocrisy and wise enough to refrain from doing evil. This is likely a commentary that Aelfric puts in because he came to the two monasteries he was abbot of because they were filled with bad monks.

Lastly, lest we forget, Aelfric asks one of the boys what does he drink? The boy replies, "ale if I have it, water if I have no ale." Water was an acceptable drink.

Language

In the 10th century, English is the dominant language. During the Great Heathen Army's invasion, many of the centers of learning were monasteries and those learned men spoke Latin. However, many of them fell to the Viking axe. Alfred the Great in the 880's establishes English as the dominant language.

Alfred translated several of these important works himself, Pope Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Care*, Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, St Augustine's *Soliloquies*, and the first 50 psalms of the Psalter. He then had other works translated by court scholars that he gathered from Wales, England, and France. These included Orosius's *Histories against the Pagans*, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bald's *Leechbook*, *Metres of Boethius*, *Dialogues of Gregory the Great*, the *Blostman "Blooms"*. And he probably had *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* commissioned.

He set up a court school where his children, the children of his nobles, and "a good many of lesser birth" would be educated in the liberal arts in both English and Latin. The goal was two-fold; gain an educated populace and enable a better system of communication. Alfred was aware of another problem; the larger the kingdom got, the more he needed to rely on other officials to carry out his commands. That meant more opportunity for corruption. However, with an educated bureaucracy in English, that lessened the corruption.

Alfred also paid for these schools from his own revenues. I do not have information if that practice continued 100 years later. Quite possibly it did. England pays millions of pennies to the Vikings during the reigns of Aethelred and beyond. So, England was quite wealthy and probably could afford a public education system^{2 3}.

² Asser, Life of Alfred

³ Pollard, Alfred the Great

My persona as a lesser noble or decently well off freeman probably would have gone to one of these “court” schools.

Since English is the language of the land, Oswyn is at least on a level playing field. The laws are in English. Business on all levels is in English. The nobles, the clergy, and the courts are in English. So, Oswyn at least can represent himself at all levels of society and can understand everything that is happening because it is in a common language. This changes after the Conquest when Norman French becomes the language of court and the law.

It is not until 1362 that English is the official language in Parliament and Courts of Law again.

It is not until Henry IV, in 1399, that the King of England is a native English speaker again.⁴

Law

Similar to the change in language is the change in law. In Oswyn’s time, courts are rare, happening a few times per year. Most justice is personal or dealt with on the shire level. Most penalties are fines paid from the guilty to the victim. One important item is that Alfred instituted a system of checks and balances and got rid of the church courts. So at least, everyone dealt with the same justice system.

Punishment under the Anglo-Saxon period was primarily financial, fines, recompense, and confiscation of property. Rarely were physical punishments used but when they were they included floggings, beatings, cutting off extremities, and sometimes execution. Under later periods, trial by ordeal came into being as well. In Oswyn’s time, there would be trial by ordeal.

Town v Country and Military service

In Anglo-Saxon England after Alfred, the center of a community is the burh. This is a fortified town. Each burh had a quantity of “hides” associated. A hide was enough land to support a family. Each family was required to provide one man to serve in the fyrd. At any given time, half of the fryd was on guard duty and the other half working at home. In times of need, the whole fryd could be called up at once for a short time. We don’t know exactly how long time may be but we do know that Harold was concerned that his fyrdmen might go back home before he could engage William.

These burhs became the centers of commerce in Anglo-Saxon England. Taxes were collected there and a market culture developed around these towns.

Related to that is land ownership. Anglo-Saxon landowner is complicated. While the King held many lands, the earls held lands in their own right. Freeman also held lands in their own right even if they owed taxes or service to an Earl. Land may be held by charter or by boc. Oswyn or at least Oswyn’s family probably held some land as part of the charter of Bath. Oswyn’s family was responsible for fryd

⁴ David Cowley, *Hasting, 1066- Words We’d Wield If We’d Won*

duties at Bath. They were responsible for tax (in coin or goods) to the Abbot of Bath Abbey or the Earl of Wessex.

Status of Women

I want to preface this section with the status of women was nowhere near as good as it is today. There is a tendency to romanticize the status of women in some eras. So, while I will be stating that things were better under such and such an era or ruler, that is only in comparison to the other eras.

Under Anglo-Saxon England, women enjoyed several rights that would erode over time and by Norman times would be completely absent.⁵

In general, women worked in the home in Anglo-Saxon times. There is strong evidence that the word, “wif”, from which we get the modern word wife, has connotations with weaving. In wills, we often see references to the male part of a line called the waepnedhealf (weapon half) or sperehealf (spear half) and the female part of the line as the wifhealf or spinelhealf (spindle half). We also know that Anglo-Saxons were renowned for their embroidery and weaving. This was likely done by women.

Also, the suffix –stere, or more modernly, -ster, represents a woman. The words brewster, maltster, and tapster are feminine words and represent that a woman performed these functions.

That is not to say that women only worked in the home though. The tradition of the shield-maiden was present in Anglo-Saxon England. Edgar the Peaceable (King in Oswyn’s time)’s great Aunt was Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercian, a skilled warleader in her own right and helped to repel the Vikings out of the Danelaw. To be fair, this would only be about ~40 years ago to Oswyn. As Christianity becomes more entrenched, this type of role would be less available to women but it probably still exists in Oswyn’s time.

But it was still present. The Old English poem, *Judith*, is present around the year 1000. The poem *Judith* is based on the biblical Book of *Judith*. In this book and the poem, *Judith* enters the Assyrian camp and beheads the Assyrian king for crime against her people. In the poem, *Judith* is treated like the male heroic figures, *Beowulf* for instance. In fact, our extant copy of the poem *Judith* occurs in the *Nowell Codex*, immediately after *Beowulf*. The *Nowell Codex* is our sole source of *Beowulf*. This is important. Both the most famous male Anglo-Saxon hero poem and the female Anglo-Saxon hero poem exist side by side in the same volume. Aelfric writes a homily based on the poem, urging his people, especially the women, to be like *Judith* in driving off the Vikings. He writes, “þeo is eac on English on ure wisan iset eow mannum to bisne, þet ge eower eard mid wæpnum beweriæn wið onwinnende here.” Translated into modern English, the phrase reads: “It is also set as an example for you in English according to our style, so that you will defend your land with weapons against an attacking force.”⁶

Anglo-Saxon marriages were entered into freely. A woman had the right to refuse marriage to any suitor, regardless of her family’s desires. In practice, this may have been less true but this was the law.

⁵ Christine G. Clark, *Women’s Rights in Early England*, 1995 *BYU L. Rev.* 207 (1995)

⁶ Nelson, M. ed., *Judith, Juliana, and Elene: Three fighting Saints*, (Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 1991) p 47

The husband was required to pay a morgengifu (morning gift) to his bride. This money or land was solely under the woman's control to keep, sell, bequeath, or dispose of as she would. Future income to the marriage belonged to both partners as Aethelbert's laws show. If a woman wished divorce, she was to get half the property of the marriage. Wives were not to be held guilty for the crimes of their husbands and widows were protected in inheritance.

The wergild for men and women were equal. It depended more on class than sex. Women were legally separate from the husbands. A law of Ine states that the fine for stealing without knowledge by his wife. The wife is held innocent unless it can be proved that she was a part of the crime.

A famous case in a charter involves Leofwine and Wynflaed. They disputed the ownership of some estates. Wynflaed called at least 24 witnesses to support her claim, 13 of which were also women. Wynflaed won that case. In another case, a man named Edwin sued his own mother for land he claimed was his. He could not produce any witnesses to his cause. She was called into court, announced that she had no land belonging to him, and then and there announced that she was leaving all of her lands and goods to one of her kinswomen and none to her son. We know this because it was written in a gospel book from that minster. Women were able to represent themselves in court.

Women could inherit equally with men. We have numerous wills demonstrating that a woman had control of her own lands and wealth (as above). King Alfred in his will noted that his grandfather had given money to the "spear side rather than the spindle side" but reminded his heirs that he was perfectly free to will his property to whomever, male or female, he choose.

Women often were in positions of power in abbeys. There are descriptions of "joint houses", abbeys with both monks and nuns where there as an Abbess in charge. In Oswyn's Bath, this was the case.

Many place names are based on female names. Bamburgh is named for Queen Bebbe. Darlton was named for a Deorlufu. Elton was named for an Aethelflaed. Churches were also named for women. St Guthlac's sister Pega gave her name to Peakirk. This is an indication that the women in question, owned the land.

Keys were a common grave find with women. As a law code states, there were boxes and cabinets that only women had the keys to.

Obviously, upper class women had more freedoms and many of them would continue in Norman times. Many upper class Anglo-Saxon women were literate and educated. Many held lands in their own right and managed those lands personally.

Some notable powerful women were Cnyethryth, wife of King Offa was the only Anglo-Saxon woman was coins struck in her name. Pope Hadrian I named both her and Offa in a privilege her granted them. Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercians, I mentioned above. Queen Edith, wife to Edward the Confessor, was amongst the few Anglo-Saxon nobility to keep her lands after the Conquest.

After the Conquest, many of these rights were reduced. Wives were subjects of their husbands. Again, in practice, a poor couple needs both partners to succeed but legally, wives were little more than

property. Husbands owned all property in the marriage. The stronger Church in Norman times was more anti-feminist. Wives were expected to be seen but not heard. This even applied to saints. Prior to the Norman Conquest, there were many female saints in Anglo-Saxon England. While the number declined throughout the period, it goes to zero rapidly after 1066.

We see throughout the Norman period that even the traditional women's jobs, like brewing, cheesemaking, and weaving, become dominated by men, either directly by taking the job, or indirectly through male-dominated guilds that instructed women on how to do the job.

We know little else about the rights of women in Norman England because women were considered unimportant.

The Conquest

Between 1066 and 1086, 4500 English thanes have been replaced by 180 barons, only 2 were English. There were 1400 middle landowners, only about 100 of which are English. In 20 years, upper English society is basically Norman. In the early 1100's, William of Malmesbury⁷ writes, "It is the habitation of strangers and the dominion of foreigners. There is today no Englishman who is either earl, bishop, or abbot. The newcomers devour the riches and entrails of England and there is no hope of the misery coming to an end."

William's quote is quite poignant. The Normans were not benevolent dictators but were looking to increase their own coffers. Changes at the top do make changes at the bottom because the top is now viewing the bottom in a different light.

As another point to consider, in a version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the Peterborough version, there is a poem that eulogizes King William. Here is the Rime of King William in modern English.⁸

He had castles built / and poor men terribly oppressed. / The king was severe / and he took many marks of gold and / hundreds of pounds of silver from his underlings. / All this he took from the people, / and with great injustice / from his subjects, / out of trivial desire. / He had fallen into avarice / and he loved greediness above everything else / He established many deer preserves / and he set up many laws concerning them / such that whoever killed a hart or a hind / should be blinded. / He forbade (hunting of) harts / and also of boars. / He loved the wild deer / as if he were their father. / And he also decreed that the hares / should be allowed to run free. / His great men complained of it, / and his poor men lamented it; / but he was so severe / that he ignored all their needs. / But they had to follow above all else / the king's will, / if they wanted to live / or hold on to land, / land or property (or esteem) / or have his good favour. / Woe, that any man / should be so proud / as to raise himself up / and reckon himself above all men. / May almighty God show mercy on his soul / and forgive him his sins

⁷ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum: The History of the English Kings*, 2 vols., ed. and tr. R.A.B. Mynors, R.M Thomson and M Winterbottom (Oxford, 1998)

⁸ Lerer, Seth. "Old English and Its Afterlife." In *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*. Ed. David Wallace. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. 15-16.

Conclusions

Even though the Colloquay is a teaching tool or a best a work of fiction, Aelfric draws on his life and experiences to write dialogue. His students would be familiar with what he says. And in sections, we see Aelfric's humor come to light as well (sorry, you have to take the class to get those examples). If we pair those dialogues with other pieces of research, we see what English society was like before the series of wars and conquests that lead to the Norman Conquest. Even under Cnut, many things were similar but under William, everything is different. Those discussions are for a different class though.

We see a thriving town. Food is procured in a variety of ways. Goods are traded and sold. The population is on three levels but they all interconnect. It seems idyllic and because it is fiction, it is. But there is the glimmer of truth. This is the time after one storm but before another. Hence why the King in the time is given the name, the Peaceable. Having seen the year 1000 (or nearly), peace would be a distance memory until the Conquest is over and the Normans become normalcy.