documented study of how a particularly exegetical approach gains momentum and runs its course.

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The author offers two distinct, albeit overlapping, formulations of his main aims: ‘The chief purposes of the present study … will be to examine the literary dimensions of these documents, to present tenth-century Anglo-Saxon charters as works of Anglo-Latin literature, and, by examining the intellectual hinterlands of their writers, to elevate those writers from being mere anonymous draftsmen to being authors in their own right’ (p. 7); ‘above all, it is the purpose of this study to work out what [the] message [of charters] was, who [their] audience was likely to have been and why charters became so central to the exercising of royal power in the tenth century, and to locate them more firmly in the intellectual history of ninth- and tenth-century England’ (p. 27). The agenda thus defined is an ambitious one. It should be said at once that the author pursues it with considerable success.

The introduction sets the scene by contrasting the clarity of prose that one might expect in a diploma with the bombastic style of Aldhelm of Malmesbury (d. 709/10), noting how the manner of the latter first began to infect that of the former in a Mercian document of 840. Chapter 1 then explores the influence of this Mercian style on the charters of Wessex from the ninth to the tenth centuries, arguing that where Alfred the Great had used literary translations to communicate with his subjects, Edward the Elder deployed charters for the same purpose. Chapter 2 explores how Athelstan further exploited charters, the product of a royal writing office, to disseminate his power and image: while the key legal information was couched in simple prose, the formulae grew more complex, with famously extravagant royal styles such as basileus and gubernator.

Chapter 3 turns to ‘Athelstan A’, the anonymous individual who, between 928 and 934, drafted nineteen stylistically distinctive charters for that monarch. Testing and upholding the idea that these were indeed the product of a single individual, Snook offers a literary and intellectual profile of him, then develops the case – plausible on the grounds of compatibility of experience, coincidence of career dates, and prominence in the witness lists of the charters themselves – that he may have been identical with Bishop Ælfwine of Lichfield. Chapter 4
tackles charters of the mid-tenth century: if one reason for their lesser projection of royal majesty was that ‘The extraordinary style of the Athelstan A diplomas was of course unsustainable. If writing one was a pain, deciphering it must have been nearly impossible’ (p. 131), another was the rising influence of ecclesiastics at court. Fluctuations in the balance of power between Church and state are sensitively decoded from the language of the relevant charters. In chapter 5 the reign of Edgar is presented as a period when charters diversified in form (with at least four drafters working concurrently), yet had a unity of purpose, namely glorifying the monarch in good, plain Latin.

A short conclusion underlines the significance of the Anglo-Saxon Charter as ‘a powerful tool of royal propaganda’ (p. 190), stresses that it demonstrates the existence of a Chancery in the tenth century, and lauds the Latinity of those who drafted the documents: ‘projecting messages about intellectualism and royal authority was all very well, but it would have come to nothing if there had not been individuals at court whose levels of Latinity were truly stratospheric’ (p. 192). There is an index of charters and a general index, the latter including an entry for ‘charters’ whose fifty or so subentries present in microcosm the main themes of the book.

Given the complexity of the work, typographical errors are few and minor (e.g. ‘osetnatious’ for ‘ostentatious’ on p. 82, and an omitted cross-reference on p. 90). Odder is giving the shelf-mark that should be London, British Library, Royal 5 F. iii as ‘Oxford, Bodleian Library, Harley 5.f.iii’ and, since this was done on two separate occasions – p. 52 n. 72 and p. 106 n. 35 – it was clearly not a typographical slip but a bizarre multiple confusion. There are occasional questionable points of detail, as when we are told that the Square Minuscule of the documents of King Athelstan (r. 924/5–939) ‘visibly invoked the scribal culture of the past’ (p. 72). For as the script in question was only emerging in the first quarter of the tenth century and only began to take on standardized forms in the 920s and 930s, it is difficult to see how this could have been so. It is regrettable that the volume does not include illustrations and thus the important and differing contributions made by layout and script in the relevant single-sheet originals is concealed. The sole reproduction (on the cover) is but a detail and, as half of this has been ‘bled’ to darkness for artistic effect, it is almost valueless as an illustration.

More generally, one wonders whether the use of particular stylistic antecedents could really have conveyed the messages that are here ascribed to them. If the literary debt of certain charters to earlier writers is not in doubt and while this may have been done to convey subtle messages about the relationship of the regime in question to a former one or to an earlier golden age, it is questionable whether most people reading or hearing such documents would have been alive to their Aldhelmian linguistic heritage, and doubtful whether many of the select
group who were would have understood this to be linking the politics of the present to the positive values of yore. Indeed, the fact that the Latinity and erudition of the drafters in question is rightly celebrated here as exceptional is in obvious tension with the implicit assumption that there was a broader audience ready for, and responsive to, the overtones of their flights of fancy. This does not mean that such meta-messages may not have been intended; it does, however, make one wonder how often they were understood in the ways here suggested.

Yet such healthy scepticism should not distract from the author’s achievements. Taking advantage of the signal advances in recent years in the editing of Anglo-Saxon charters, Snook has provided a rich, sensitive assessment not just of the literary content of these documents but also of the possible political and ecclesiastical significances of these same literary qualities. Furthermore, he presents his findings with an admirable clarity and a wry humour that are the antithesis of his source material. Anyone concerned with pre-Conquest England and its literary culture will be enriched by his work, which, moreover, demands and deserves to be read in full.

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In 1981 Kevin Kiernan controversially claimed that Beowulf was contemporary with its sole extant manuscript which, he argued, was copied during the reign of King Cnut (1016–35). Prior to Kiernan, scholars had usually assigned the poem’s copying to the reign(s) of Æthelred the Unready (978–1013, 1014–16) and it was widely, though not universally, accepted that the manuscript itself was a late copy of an already ancient poem. Helen Damico’s new monograph locates both the copying of the manuscript and the poem’s composition even later than Kiernan, proposing that the first two-thirds of Beowulf allegorize the struggle over the English royal succession which took place after Cnut’s death in 1035. Given the radical nature of Damico’s thesis and the ongoing, at times heated, arguments concerning the poem’s date, this book will be of interest to all Beowulf scholars.

In four chapters Damico lays out a series of what she contends are striking parallels between certain episodes in the poem and some of the major political events of the first half of the eleventh century. Chapter 1 argues that in describing the beheadings of Æschere (lines 1279–99, 1408–24) and Grendel (lines 1573a–90),