INSCRIPTIONS, WRITING AND LITERACY IN SAXON LONDON

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SUMMARY

At least 20 inscriptions survive from Saxon London; several are recent finds from excavations in the City and Covent Garden. Three inscriptions are on memorial stones and one is on a stone sundial. Five inscriptions are on luxury metalwork: a sword, a knife, a binding strip, a ring and a gold disc. Five inscriptions are on more ordinary objects: two on pieces of bone, one on a bone object, one on lead waste and one on a small fossil. There are at least six inlaid inscriptions on imported swords. The inscriptions use both the roman and runic scripts and are in English, Latin and Norse languages.

Other examples of writing in Saxon London are also discussed: charters, books, seals, church inscriptions, coins and coin-brooch legends. Aspects of writing and literacy are discussed including the scripts and languages used, the question of who was writing inscriptions and to what degree they were literate, and the function or purpose of inscriptions. It is suggested that from the 8th century there were a number of semi-literate people, perhaps artisans, who could carry out simple inscriptions and who aspired to use the written word because of its associations of power and prestige.

INTRODUCTION

For the majority of us in Britain today literacy is something we probably take for granted: thanks to our national education system we can nearly all read a newspaper or write a letter in the same language using the same script. Beneath this rather simplistic surface there lies a wealth of complexities such as the debate on the way literacy and language are taught, the varying standard of writing or reading English, regional or ethnic languages such as Welsh or Gujerati, and different scripts such as Arabic or secretarial shorthand. These themes of languages, scripts and standards of literacy are also encountered when looking at inscriptions and writing in the Anglo-Saxon period.

This article will attempt to survey the surviving inscriptions from Saxon London and its hinterland and examine the background of literacy by considering the forms of writing that Londoners may have encountered. The concept of the 'London area' is a little vague and it could well be argued that the M25 is not a very Saxon boundary as boundaries go but it does at least define a hinterland that was roughly a day's travel from the City. This hinterland included several monastic institutions from Chertsey in the west to Barking in the east. This area, as well as being an important Anglo-Saxon political and economic region, has the advantage of being one of the most densely excavated areas in the world. Modern archaeological excavation is getting quite good at 'recovering history' lower down the social scale and it is hoped to show that this works for inscriptions as well as, say, buildings.

The academic study of literacy falls across several disciplines and there is now a large body of writing on the subject.[1] Anthropologists such as Goody have viewed writing as a technology whose introduction to a non-literate society can have profound effects (1977). More recently David Barton has looked at the 'ecology' of literacy and has discussed a number of points that are significant in relation to writing in the Anglo-Saxon period (1994). He distinguishes between 'literacy practices', the general way that literacy is used in a particular culture, and 'literacy events', specific activities where literacy

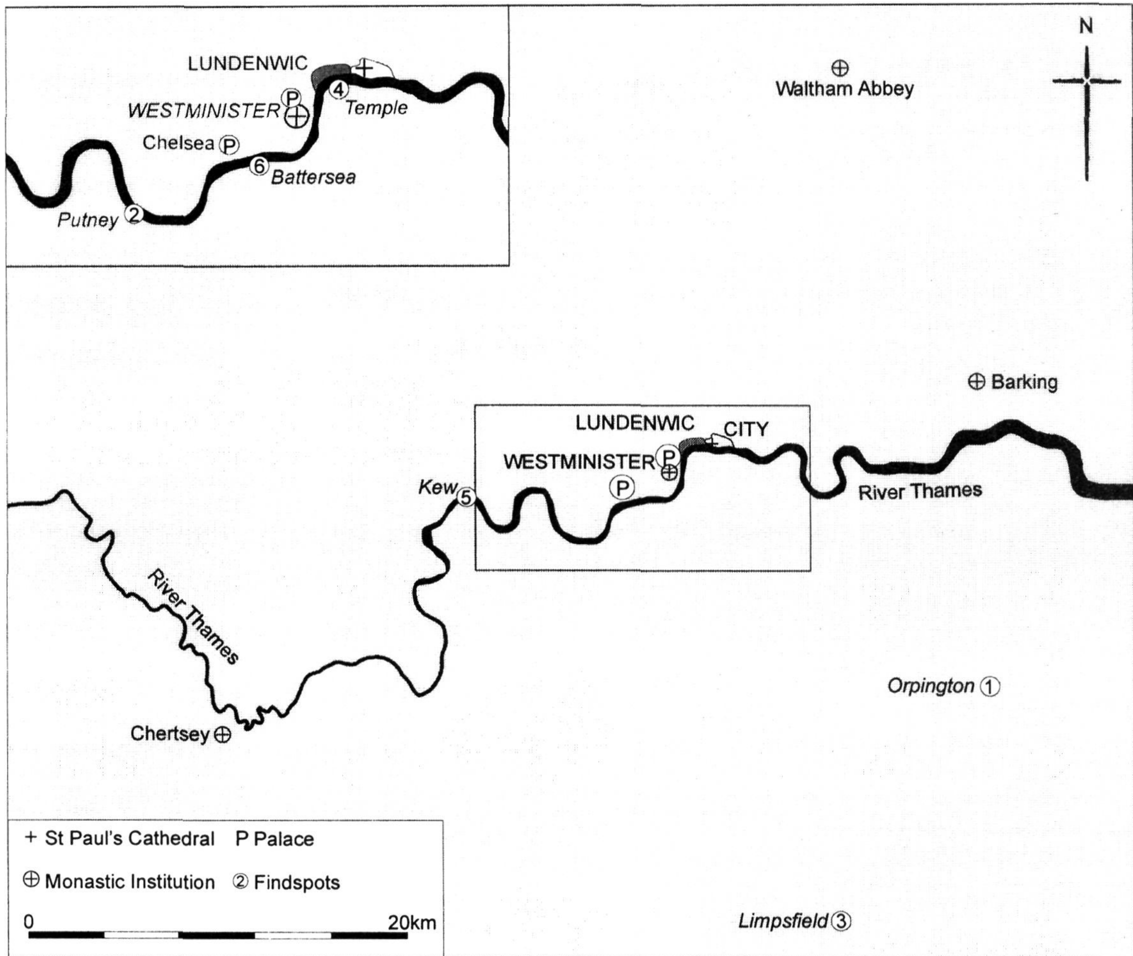

Fig 1. Map of Saxon London area. The find-spot numbers are referred to in the text

is used (Barton 1994, 33–7). Individuals have different 'literacies' for different occasions, and have developing 'literacy histories' marked by personal literacy events (38–40, 49–51). The results of literacy events are 'texts' that range in scope from, for example, telephone messages to legal announcements or school graffiti to exercise book tests (57–64, 179–181). He also notes that the literacy events of writing and reading can be significantly different, particularly in the case of learners (154–8).

Literacy practices, to use Barton's terms, clearly develop during the Anglo-Saxon period. Right at the beginning of the period there was the existing Romano-British tradition of Latin literacy using the roman script. There is extensive evidence from early Christian inscriptions that this tradition survived in the 'Celtic' south-west of Britain (Howlett 1998) and it could also be argued that vestiges of the tradition of writing survived in 'Anglo-Saxon' areas in the form of visible Romano-British inscriptions and Roman or Merovingian coin legends. Germanic settlers brought the less developed runic literacy which is seen in simple inscriptions in continental Europe and early Anglo-Saxon England (Hines 1990). The Christian missions of Augustine in the south and Irish missionaries in the north allowed the development of new, predominantly Latin, literacy practices associated with a 'religion of the book' (Archibald *et al* 1997). It is possible that the use of the English language in Northumbrian and Mercian manuscripts from the mid 7th century has a wider political and social dimension as it coincides with the first references to 'the English' people and nation

(Toon 1985, 89). In the 9th century Viking raids and settlement brought a new language, Old Norse, to Danelaw England as well as a Scandinavian version of the runic script. Anglo-Saxon society became increasingly literate from the 9th century with the use of legal documents by royalty and aristocracy, and it is possible that late Anglo-Saxon England had a more literate bureaucracy and culture than early Norman England (Kelly 1990; Clanchy 1979, ch 1).

A variety of literacy events can be seen in the texts of Anglo-Saxon inscriptions and manuscripts. The majority of inscriptions are clearly at the more basic end of the spectrum of literacy, comparable perhaps to the examples of graffiti and telephone messages that Barton gives (see above). Some inscriptions may hardly be literacy events at all in the sense that they may be more decorative than literate. An important difference between Anglo-Saxon and modern literacy practice is that the act of *writing* was almost certainly viewed as a separate professional skill to be learned by monks or in some circumstances by tradesmen who might be called on to execute an inscription. In Asser's biography of Alfred, for example, he notes that the king learned to read and translate but apparently not to write (Keynes & Lapidge 1983, 99–100).

In Bede's History written in the early 8th century he describes five languages current in the British Isles: English, British, Irish, Pictish and Latin (Sherley-Price 1968, 38). Had Bede lived a century later he would have added Norwegian to that list. For our purposes, looking at the London area, Old English and Latin are the main languages, with Old Norse potentially appearing from the 9th century. There is no extant evidence in south-east England for the survival of the British language into the Anglo-Saxon period. It is worth noting that there might be varying standards of literacy in different languages: Alfred, in a well known passage in his introduction to his translation of Pope Gregory's Pastoral Care, laments the decline of Latin literacy in England and recommends that other important religious texts be translated into English so that they might be more widely available (Keynes & Lapidge 1983, 124–6).

The variations in language and script clearly had different associations but there were no hard and fast boundaries, for example, between 'secular' English and 'religious' Latin or 'manuscript' roman and 'inscribed' runes. Recent articles have looked at both the links between the two scripts and the varying associations of script and language (Page 1997; Okasha 1990). By the 9th century the English language was commonly used in many ecclesiastical legal documents but Latin still tended to be used for royal documents perhaps because of the greater 'authority' still implied by the use of Latin. Regarding the choice of script, runes were clearly more suited to inscriptions than to manuscript use but they do appear surprisingly often in religious and literary works, for example in the Gospel book now in Leningrad where they are used for two names in the margin (Page 1995a, 3) or as a 'signature' to poems by Cynewulf (Bradley 1982, 165; Whitelock 1970, 177).

Before turning to the London inscriptions and to other forms of writing it might be appropriate to draw attention to the problems of the sample we have. With runic inscriptions René Derolez guessed that less than 1% of the total number originally carved may have survived (1990, 399). This reminds us that that we should be cautious in drawing general conclusions about literacy from the surviving examples. Furthermore new inscriptions are currently being discovered at a rate of nearly one a year so there may well be a few surprises to come.

INSCRIPTIONS

Monumental stone inscriptions

Anglo-Saxon inscriptions on memorial stones or cross-slabs represent quite a significant proportion, perhaps nearly three-quarters, of the surviving inscriptions from England. However there are only three surviving memorial inscriptions from London – not a very impressive total when compared with, say, seven from the City of York or as many as 15 from the priory at Lindisfarne (see Okasha 1971).[2] All three of the London stones date from the late 10th or 11th century and at least two have a Scandinavian connection. A stone slab discovered during 19th-century building works at St Paul's Cathedral churchyard has an Old Norse inscription in Scandinavian runes which records, interestingly, the people who had the stone erected and not the deceased person (Fig 2). There are two inscribed stones from the church of All Hallows-by-the-Tower on the east of the City; the church also has elements of Saxon fabric in the crypt. Neither text is complete but one of the

Fig 2. 11th-century memorial stone with runic inscription from St Paul's Cathedral (Museum of London)

inscriptions has an Old English memorial formula written in roman script which commemorates both the deceased and the person who had the monument erected. Both the language and the decoration show Scandinavian influence (Okasha 1967; Okasha 1971, nos 87 & 88).

It would seem that in the case of London it can be argued that there was a new fashion for decorated and inscribed memorial stones in high status circles under Anglo-Danish rule in the first half of the 11th century. Furthermore it may have been as important to name the donor or sponsor of the stone, perhaps a surviving relation or heir, as the deceased.

The only other surviving inscription on stone is on a carved sun dial incorporated in the fabric of All Saint's church, Orpington, probably originally in the late Saxon village church (Fig 7 and findspot 1 on Fig 1).[3] Three roman script texts are complemented by a short runic inscription. The three main texts are descriptive in a cryptic, rather playful way, using both English and Latin: 'for him who knows how to seek (it)', 'to tell and to hold', 'clock' (Okasha 1971, no.105). The runic text, consisting only of three vowels, may well be more decorative than linguistic though it might be functional in the sense that the runes could mark out sections of the dial corresponding to different times of the day (Page 1967).

Inscriptions on 'luxury' objects

Five inscriptions on what might be termed items of luxury metalwork are known from the London area. A decorated iron knife found by metal detecting on the Thames foreshore at Putney has an inlaid inscription in niello on both faces of the blade (findspot 2 on Fig 1). Both of the texts are in roman script though only one is now legible: this gives the Anglo-Saxon male name Osmund (Okasha 1983, no.174). A large fragment of a silver-gilt binding strip (also found in the Thames), possibly for a late 8th-century knife scabbard, has a fairly obscure Anglo-Saxon runic inscription (Wilson 1964, no.45; Webster & Backhouse 1991, no.179). The inscription may be some sort of cryptogram or anagram since it contains sequences of the roman alphabet when transliterated: 'abcde', 'hik' and 'rst' (Page 1995b, 120–1). A small gold disc, 9mm in diameter, found by metal detecting at Limpsfield Grange in Surrey has an image of an eagle and the roman script letters 'a' and 'q' (findspot 3 on Fig 1). This is interpreted as the symbol of St John the evangelist with an abbreviated Latin *aquila*, 'eagle'. The disc presumably comes from a larger piece, perhaps a reliquary, and it is probably 9th century in date (Okasha & Youngs 1996). There is no obvious local Saxon context for the find but a settlement and church at Limpsfield are recorded in Domesday Book and evidence of earlier Anglo-Saxon cemeteries has been found nearby.[4]

The most luxurious item is an impressive decorated iron short sword dating to around the late 9th century that is often referred to as the Thames scramasax since, once again, it was found in the Thames probably during river dredging. The sword bears an Anglo-Saxon runic inscription that has been elaborately inlaid using twisted bronze, copper and silver wire (Wilson 1964, no.36). The inscription has a complete (if unusual) 'abc' or 'futhorc' of 28 letters followed by the Old English male name Beagnoth.

A probably 10th or 11th-century lead tin alloy ring, which could perhaps be a hilt-band from a very small knife, comes from excavations at the Thames Exchange site in the City (Fig 3). Excavation showed that from the 10th century the Roman river foreshore was being reclaimed by a series of late Saxon banks and revetments (Schofield 1998, 282–3). The ring has a short Anglo-Saxon runic inscription that may contain the runic equivalent of our 'abc' – the beginning

Fig 3. 10th or 11th-century ring with runic inscription from Thames Exchange excavation (Museum of London Archaeology Service)

of the runic alphabet 'fuþ' – and a possible English male name Ine (Gosling 1989 & 1991b).

Four of these five inscriptions seem to have some common elements: the use of a personal name and the alphabetic 'futhorc' or 'abc' elements. Given that these inscriptions are on items of luxury metalwork that were presumably commissioned and paid for by someone of a certain wealth and social status, we might assume that the owner would have his name on the object. This is not however an altogether safe assumption since other inscriptions on objects can name the donor, composer, craftsman or even the repairer. We might suggest that there are hints of some sort of charm or 'magical' significance in the use of the 'futhorc' and 'abc' in these inscriptions. Most runologists tend to play down the magical connotations of the runic script – it is certainly the case that very few of the surviving inscriptions can be shown to have any obvious magical content. However even the self-avowed sceptic R. I. Page suggests that there might be magical connotations in the Thames scramasax and the binding strip inscriptions (Page 1995b, 120–1). We are somewhat in the realms of speculation but we might imagine these inscriptions to have some sort of talismanic function such as to bring good luck or good cutting or stabbing to the named owner.

Inscriptions on simple objects

Whereas in the past only the more impressive or obvious inscriptions on swords or stones tended to get noticed, thanks to modern archaeological excavation techniques five 'casual' inscriptions on more humble objects have recently come to light. The reason for this is partly thanks to careful excavation techniques and also due to new techniques such as on-site metal detecting and the routine collection of soil samples and animal bone in order to study diet, animal husbandry and the environment. On some sites literally tonnes of soil and animal bone are collected and washed and so occasional inscriptions are coming to light thanks to the attention of those doing the processing and analysis.

In 1985 archaeological excavation confirmed the suggestion that the middle Saxon (7th to 9th-century) town of London, the trading port of *Lundenwic*, lay not within the walls of the Roman city but to the west in the area of modern Covent Garden (Cowie & Whytehead 1988). Archaeological evidence is beginning to flesh out Bede's description of an '*emporium* for many nations' (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 142–3). An inscribed bone object was found in recent excavations at the Royal Opera House within the middle Saxon town. It looks like a small knife handle made from a sawn length of sheep bone but it could perhaps be a needle case. It is decorated with incised concentric circles and hatching that are designed to frame a runic inscription that runs up the length of the object. The object came from a pit, dating to around the mid 8th century, which lay between two properties in a dense network of alleys and building plots (Malcolm *et al* forthcoming). The inscription is in Anglo-Saxon runes and is quite difficult to interpret: it may even be deliberately obscure or 'riddling' (Page 1998, 13). It might be interpreted as the name Œthilward if we suppose that the inscriber used the (repeated) first runic letter to represent the full rune-name 'œthil' as opposed to its normal meaning of the vowel 'œ' (Page 1998, 13).

Another runic inscription has come to light even more recently at excavations at the National Portrait Gallery, right at the west of the *Lundenwic* settlement. There are two short inscriptions on a single sheep vertebra which R. I. Page has provisionally read as one or possibly two personal names, apparently written by two different people.[5]

Excavations at a middle Saxon butchery site at the Lyceum Ballroom in Exeter Street, also within *Lundenwic*, produced a rather peculiar inscription on a fossilised sea-urchin from one of the butchers' waste pits (Farid & Brown 1997). The three roman script letters may be a personal name and the fact that they were inscribed on

such a distinct object might suggest that the object was special in some way, perhaps an amulet (Okasha 1996).

An 11th-century bone 'trial piece' from excavations at Guildhall Yard in the City has a name inscribed on both sides and interlace ornamentation on one side (Fig 4). Both the decoration and the inscriptions were presumably inscribed for practice, using the bone as an 'exercise book'. The two inscriptions are variations of what is probably the Old English male name Ælfbeorht, though the female name Ælfburh is a possibility. Though the inscription uses roman script, some of the letters appear to be influenced by runic forms which suggests an interesting 'cross-fertilisation' (or confusion?) of literacy (Okasha 1991; Gosling 1991a & 1991b).[6] The object comes from a large pit, possibly a backfilled well, which lay to the rear of timber buildings perhaps used for metalworking and the manufacture of horn and bone objects in the 11th century, probably before the Conquest.[7]

A small irregular piece of lead, perhaps spillage from metal working, was found within the walls of what was probably an 11th-century Viking hall at Waltham Abbey. This lead fragment bears a tiny, nearly complete alphabet less than 50mm across (Okasha 1976). Like the Guildhall Yard inscription this alphabet would seem to be a trial piece inscribed by a craftsman as practice.

These five inscriptions on ordinary objects might make us reconsider the social connotations of literacy. A surprising degree of literacy is perhaps suggested by the three *Lundenwic* inscriptions. It could be argued that all three were carried out by the owners of the objects since they do not seem to be 'professional' inscriptions commissioned and executed like those on luxury metalwork items discussed above, nor do they seem to be trial pieces. They would seem to suggest a certain 'spontaneous' literacy on the part of the inscribers. The Guildhall Yard trial piece and the Waltham Abbey alphabet both suggest a professional secular literacy, albeit perhaps of limited scope compared with the professional literacy of the *scriptorium*.

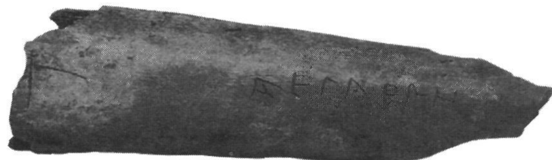

Fig 4. Inscribed 11th-century bone trial-piece from Guildhall Yard excavations (Museum of London Archaeology Service)

Imported objects with inscriptions

At least six iron swords bearing an inlaid iron 'inscription' have been found in the London area. In each case the text is in roman script and almost certainly names the manufacturer. As Ellis Davidson notes in her book on Anglo-Saxon swords, these are relatively common, particularly swords bearing the maker or workshop marks of Ulfberht and Ingelrii (Davidson 1962, 45–8). These weapons have been dated to between the late 9th and 11th centuries and were probably made in the Rhine area. Five swords come from the Thames, three of which bear the name Ingelrii (Fig 5 and findspots 2, 4 and 5 on Fig 1),[8] and two which have now fairly illegible inscriptions that seem to copy the style of the presumably famous Ulfberht and Ingelrii manufacturers (findspot 6 on Fig 1).[9] A sword from a gravel pit on a silted up tributary of the Thames at Chertsey is probably a 'genuine' Ulfberht sword (East *et al* 1985; 'Chertsey' on Fig 1). Two further swords have possible inscriptions or makers' marks but are illegible.[10]

It is interesting to note that five of these swords were found in or by the River Thames and the sixth probably comes from a now silted tributary of the Thames, the Abbey River: one is tempted to associate them directly with battles or perhaps the rituals or festivities that followed the battle or the death of a warrior. The Viking campaigns of the late 9th and early 11th centuries may be the obvious candidates to explain the presence of some of these swords in the Thames. Regarding the inscriptions themselves we can note that some of the very earliest runic inscriptions are found on weapons (Page 1973, 105–7; 1987, 23–5). The description of Grendel's sword in the poem *Beowulf* emphasises that the owner's name was marked in runes, perhaps on the hilt (Swanton 1978, l.1694–6; Cramp 1957, 65–7). It is possible that these later inlaid sword inscriptions, as well as being some sort of professional 'branding', were intended somehow to 'fortify' the sword and were perhaps consciously in a tradition of inscribing weapons. Even though these inscriptions do not prove literacy on the part of the user or purchaser they do at least demonstrate further exposure to the written word

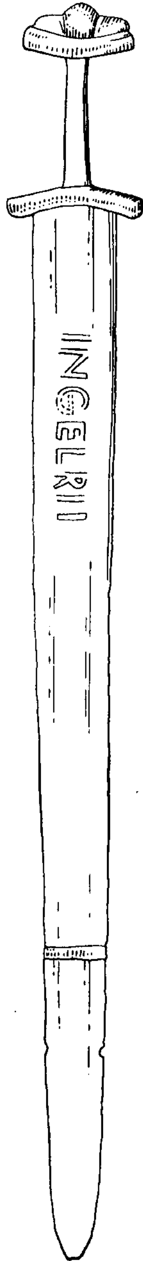

Fig 5. 10th or 11th-century imported sword with inlaid iron inscription naming the manufacturer, found at Putney. Scale 1 : 4

and perhaps the association of the written word with status, prestige or even power.

MANUSCRIPT PRODUCTION IN THE LONDON AREA

Charters and codices

We will now survey the evidence for the more formal 'literacy practice' of the production of charters and books. Manuscript production is obviously associated with monastic *scriptoria* but not all monastic institutions produced all types of manuscripts and some may have had no *scriptorium* at all. The best evidence for manuscript production and writing is of course surviving manuscripts which can be dated palaeographically and for which there is an indication of the place of production. There is evidence for professional production of charters at Barking Abbey from the end of the 7th century (Fig 6),[11] at St Paul's Cathedral from the late 8th century[12] and at Westminster Abbey from the late 10th century.[13] There is also evidence of manuscript production at the secular site of Offa's palace at Chelsea from the second half of the 8th century,[14] though the actual documents were probably drawn up by clerics from Canterbury.[15] There is some evidence that royal documents were drawn up, or at least sealed, in a royal chancery or secretariat at Edward the Confessor's palace at Westminster (Clanchy 1979, 17; Keynes 1990, 256–7). However since the palace was only around 100 metres from the Abbey,[16] and given the fact that at least one genuine royal document was produced in the Westminster Abbey *scriptorium,* we should not push the evidence for a distinct royal chancery too far (Clanchy 1979, 17).

Few larger works such as codices of religious or literary material with a definite London provenance survive.[17] A 10th or 11th-century gospel book and part of an 11th-century volume of saints' lives were probably produced at Barking Abbey.[18] Extracts of a 10th-century English translation of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* and an 11th or 12th-century volume of English laws were probably written at St Paul's.[19] An 11th or 12th-century volume of medical recipes comes from Westminster Abbey.[20] A recently discovered 11th-century fragment of Old English homily texts may also come from Westminster.[21]

There is some additional evidence of London book production in the form of medieval or later

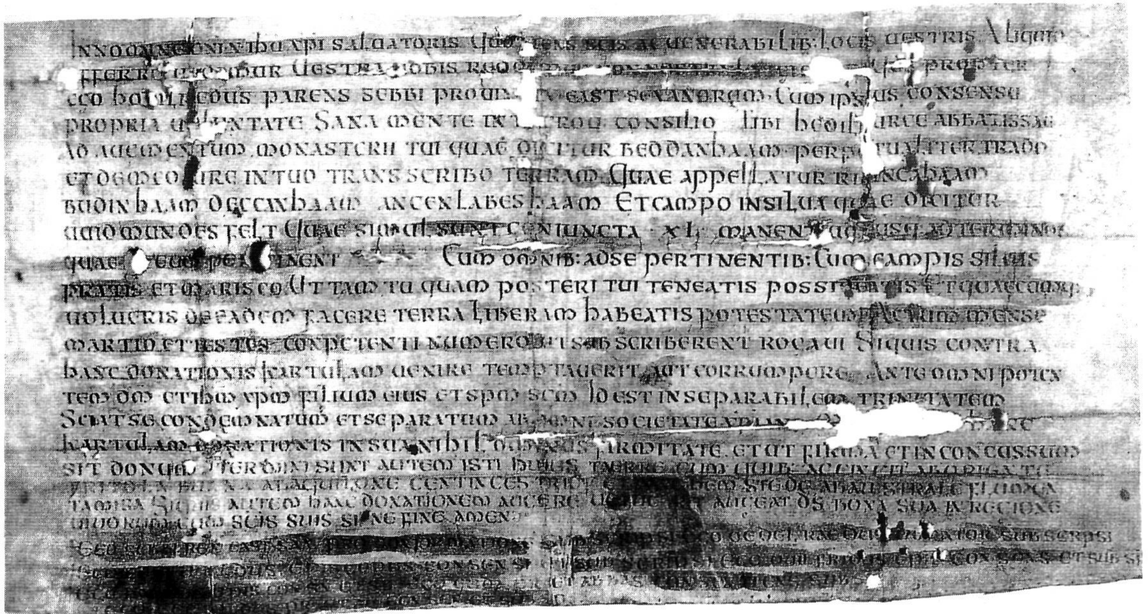

Fig 6. Charter probably written at Barking Abbey, c.686–8, with 8th-century alterations (British Library)

inventories. An inventory of 1538 from Waltham Abbey lists two gospel books 'of the Saxon tongue' that were perhaps produced at the 11th-century college that preceded the abbey (Ker 1990, xlviii). The St Paul's inventory of 1255 mentions an old psalter, 'psalterium interlineatum anglico', that may well have been written in the Saxon cathedral (Ker 1990, 579). There may have been much more Anglo-Saxon material that survived: Ker notes that many medieval catalogues ignored Anglo-Saxon material since it had generally become obsolete or illegible to the medieval reader.

In terms of quantity, less than 1% of all surviving Anglo-Saxon codices were written in London monastic *scriptoria* whereas around 6% of surviving original charters may have been produced in the London area.[22] The figure of 6% for surviving charters is quite substantial considering that London is not usually counted as an important centre of diplomatic production in the same way as say Canterbury or Durham. It is worth emphasising that it would appear to be only certain types of manuscripts that were produced at London *scriptoria.* They are nearly all charters recording royal or ecclesiastical grants of land, with some royal writs coming from Westminster Abbey (and/or the possible royal chancery). Few of the documents that became more common from the 9th century, such as wills, leases or documents relating to property negotiation, survive.

In conclusion the evidence suggests that London *scriptoria*, together with the occasional 'secular' manuscript centres at royal palaces at Chelsea and later at Westminster, produced a significant quantity of 'diplomatic' manuscripts but do not seem to have specialised in the production of books of religious or literary material. Described in other terms, the late Saxon monastic *milieu* of the London area may have had a written archive and communications 'network' nearly as strong as the more famous monastic centres to the south or north.

Archaeological evidence of manuscript production

The 'tools' of literacy and manuscript production can in some cases survive as long as the manuscripts themselves and these tools are quite often found during archaeological excavation of monastic sites. The stylus, generally made of iron or bone but sometimes of copper alloy or silver, was used both for writing on wax tablets and for pricking and ruling the vellum of manuscripts. A few have been found in the City,[23] and several were found recently in an 8th-century context during excavations at Barking Abbey (Webster &

Backhouse 1991, 90). Other 'tools' of literacy survive, some of which have been found during excavation of high-status or monastic sites elsewhere in Britain: wooden or bone writing tablets, reading pointers, even ivory book-covers (Webster & Backhouse 1991, nos. 64–5, 259–60 & 141).

Unfortunately this archaeological evidence does not suggest any 'new' sites where there might have been manuscript production but from where no manuscripts survive – no styli or other tools have been found at Saxon sites such as Chertsey Abbey or the possible Saxon antecedent of Bermondsey Abbey which may date from before the Conquest.

Seals

Seals were occasionally used in Anglo-Saxon England to impress an image, often accompanied by a name, onto hot wax in order to give a physical seal to a document. The earliest seals are known from the 9th century (such as of Cenwulf King of Mercia or Bishop Æthelwold of East Anglia) but the earliest known documents with surviving seal marks date from the reign of Edward the Confessor in the 11th century (Harvey & McGuinness 1996, 1–4). Seals were usually only used by the king, a bishop or a monastery though by the 10th or 11th century a few secular seals of knights or 'thegns' are known (Backhouse *et al* 1984, 113–4). It can be argued that the royal authority contained both in the image and the word on a seal was echoed in the use of seals by important secular figures – once again secular society was aspiring to literacy and the power of the written word.

OTHER EXPOSURE TO THE WRITTEN WORD

Churches

Christianity has always considered itself a religion 'of the book' and early illuminated manuscripts make clear the strong links between religion, the written word and images (see Archibald *et al* 1997). Surviving Anglo-Saxon churches tend to give us an impression of cool stone austerity but medieval and later descriptions of monastic churches such as Wilton Abbey in Wiltshire and Ely Abbey in Cambridgeshire give us an image of richly decorated churches with sculpture, paintings, textiles, metalwork and ivories (Backhouse *et al* 1984, 141). The written word would seem to have been an important and complementary part of this luxurious church decoration. William of Malmesbury's account of Glastonbury Abbey and Leland's account of the monastery at Reculver both mention explanatory inscriptions that accompany the sculpted and painted images (Hardy 1840, I, 25; Rahtz 1993, 33–6; Smith 1909, IV, 59–60). An indication of the fragility of such painted inscriptions is that in Leland's day he noted that three out of five painted inscriptions were 'now obliterated' and today none survive (Smith 1909, IV, 60; Backhouse *et al* 1984, 40–1).

Most of the descriptions of luxurious internal decoration refer to monastic institutions which may have been of limited accessibility for most people. It might be suggested that cathedrals such as St Paul's had similar paintings and sculpture with explanatory inscriptions. Minsters such as St Mary's Lambeth or smaller churches such as St Andrew's Holborn may well have had less grand decorative schemes but the written word may still have been present and visible. The sun dial inscription from the presumed Saxon church at Orpington, discussed above, seems to be directly addressed to a 'readership' and several other descriptive or explanatory inscriptions survive from smaller churches elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon England (Fig 7).[24]

An idea of the relatively simple levels of literacy on the part of this 'readership' might be gained from a modern parallel. In 20th-century Britain few people are literate in Greek or Latin but many of us can walk into a church and recognise familiar Latin words such as *dominus* or *deus*, understand the significance of abbreviated Latin inscriptions such as I.N.R.I., and perhaps even transliterate and comprehend short Greek texts such 'α ω', or 'χριστός'. Similarly in Saxon London people may well have been exposed to the written word in churches like Orpington and have been literate enough to be able to translate or comprehend parts of Latin or English texts.[25]

Coins

In the early 7th century imported coins had a limited commercial use in Anglo-Saxon England and by the mid 7th century gold *thrymsas* or shillings were being coined in England. The end

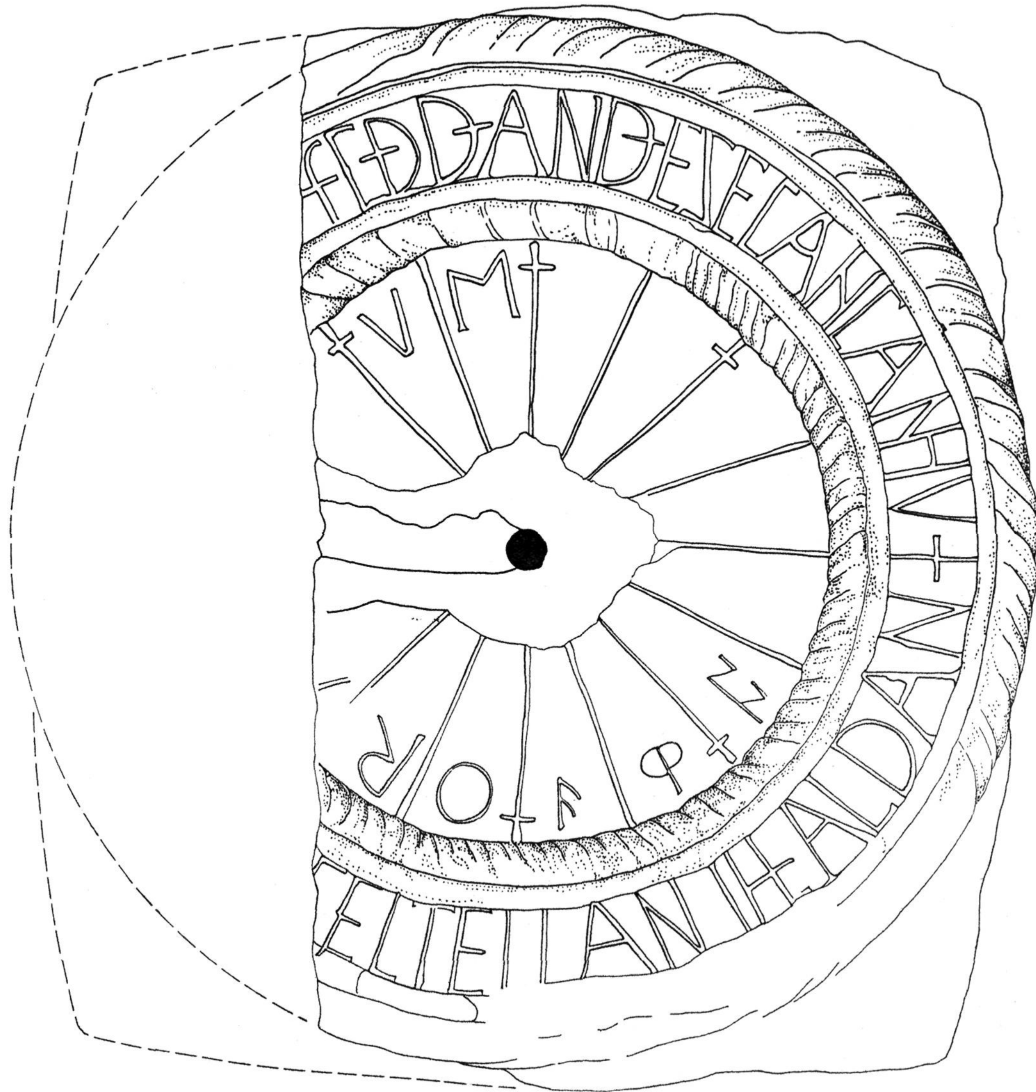

Fig 7. Late Saxon sundial from All Saints Church, Orpington. The roman text is in Latin and English and the three runic letters may be markers. Scale 1:4

of the century saw an expansion in coin use with the introduction of silver pennies, often referred to as *sceattas*. After a lapse of coining in the mid 8th century the 'broader penny' was coined at several mints. By the late 9th century the coinage was becoming more standardised, though still produced in regional centres, and in the late 10th century a reform by Edgar meant that coins were produced using centrally issued dies (Grierson & Blackburn 1986, 155–89 & 267–325; Archibald 1984). From the beginning London was one of the important mints and by the 11th century it was the principal mint for centralised die cutting (Vince 1990, 109–17).

The earlier coins are generally uninscribed except for illegible 'pseudo legends' copied from the (often Roman) prototype. Some early coins have legible runic inscriptions that name the moneyer or the mint, though these are rare on London coins and more common on Kentish and East Anglian coins (Blackburn 1991, 167–9). For example Pada, a later 7th-century moneyer probably from an east Kent mint, produced a gold shilling with a just about legible but

Fig 8. Gold solidus or mancus struck by the moneyer Pendræd at London in the 770s (British Museum)

meaningless roman script legend accompanied by a larger and clearer runic inscription of his name (Webster & Backhouse 1991, 64–5; Grierson & Blackburn 1986, no.668). The implication of this may be that the moneyer was more literate in the runic script than the roman script. Later pennies nearly always name the king who issued them and occasionally the mint or moneyer, using roman script legends. The late 8th-century London moneyer Pendræd, for example, based a coin (in fact a gold *mancus* or *solidus*) on a Roman coin but replaced the Emperor Augustus's name with his own (Fig 8. Webster & Backhouse 1991, 106). This would imply a certain degree of roman script literacy.

Even though the Anglo-Saxon economy never became as monetary as later periods, most people, particularly in an urban context such as London, would presumably have handled coins and been familiar with the images and legends on the coins. Semi-literate people may well have been able to read the name of the moneyer or king on coins and even if the user of a coin was not literate he or she would probably have associated the writing on the coin, in combination with an image of royalty, with prestige and status since the name acts as a 'guarantee' or validation of the coin.

Coin brooches

An indication of the status of coins and their inscriptions is given by the careful re-use or imitation of coins in the form of 'coin brooches'. Early examples are actual coins, usually imports, that are re-used as a brooch or other jewellery item. A coin of Theodosius (408–50) was mounted in a gold ring found in Euston, perhaps indicating an early Saxon settlement in the vicinity (Whitehead & Blackmore 1983, 84). In the 9th century, coin brooches that copy coins were occasionally imported and by the 10th century coin brooches were being produced in Anglo-Saxon England. These mimic Roman, continental European, Anglo-Saxon or even Arabic coins but usually the inscription is an illegible or illiterate series of lines.

Until recently few coin brooches had been found in London: a 10th-century pewter brooch apparently copying an 8th-century Ummayad Arabic coin was found in Cloak Lane in the City in the 19th century (Wilson 1964, no.39; Okasha 1971, 150). Recent Museum of London excavations at Bull Wharf in the City revealed the Alfredian harbour of Æthelred's Hythe, now known as Queenhithe, which produced seven coin brooches of 9th to 10th-century date thanks to extensive archaeological use of metal detectors (Blackmore forthcoming). Four of these have a pseudo roman script inscription imitating the original Roman or Merovingian coin legend while another is similar to the Cloak Lane pseudo-Arabic inscription (Fig 9).

Once again we can see an aspiration to literacy on the part of both artisan and user: apparently illiterate artisans were copying the written word (royal or imperial) in order to display writing on the brooch. The object would presumably have been worn by a none too literate purchaser or commissioner given its rather illiterate text.

Fig 9. 9th to 10th-century coin-brooch with pseudo-inscription, perhaps imitating Arabic, from excavation at Bull Wharf (Museum of London Archaeology Service)

CONCLUSIONS

Script

The evidence of inscriptions on coins might suggest that runic literacy preceded roman script literacy since 7th and 8th-century coin legends tend to use the runic script whereas from the late 8th century the roman script is more normal. It does at least seem to be the case that the runic script conveyed enough 'authority' to support the coinage, in spite of the use of the roman script on all the Imperial and Merovingian models used by moneyers (Page 1997, 123). Since few London coins had runic script legends this may not particularly apply to London. The evidence of the three *Lundenwic* inscriptions (the Royal Opera House bone handle, the Exeter Street sea-urchin and the National Portrait Gallery vertebra) might suggest that there was a limited level of secular literacy in both the roman and runic scripts in 8th-century London. By the later Saxon period the roman script clearly predominated, perhaps thanks to increasing exposure of this script in manuscripts, coins and perhaps churches.

Language

Inscriptions often do not give much evidence of language in the sense that a few letters or a name could be in any language (see Okasha 1990). However the impression is that the limited stabs at literacy we see in the 'casual' *Lundenwic* inscriptions are more likely to have been conceived in English than Latin. The more formal later inscriptions on stone that do indicate language show a surprising degree of variety: Old Norse on the St Paul's memorial slab, Old English on the All Hallows-by-the-Tower cross slab and Latin and Old English on the Orpington sun dial.

Social status

The archaeological context of many of the inscribed objects suggests a fairly ordinary social status for those who carried out the inscriptions or those who owned them. The findspots of the *Lundenwic* (and the later Guildhall Yard piece) suggest artisans and traders rather than high status individuals – in the case of the Exeter Street fossil the inscriber might possibly have been one of the site's butchers. The trial piece or practice inscriptions (the Guildhall Yard bone fragment and the Waltham Abbey lead inscription) provide clear evidence of a professional literacy where artisans are practising inscriptions, presumably for more luxury items such as metalwork. If we compare direct evidence of 'literacy events' it seems probable that our *Lundenwic* artisans who could scratch something approaching a name were more literate (in the sense of *writing*) than their king – Offa merely signed his † (as was standard practice) on a grant of land signed at Chelsea in 785 (see above and note 14). Later inscriptions such as the Orpington sun dial and the St Paul's and All Hallows memorial stones might suggest that there was a reasonably extensive literate 'readership' for these public displays of writing.

Degree of literacy

The act of inscribing implies a certain level of literacy though one must be careful not to overstate the case – our Guildhall Yard artisan Ælfbeorht (or Ælfburh, see above) was clearly not sat at home in his (or her) timber building studying a copy of Donatus's *Ars Minor*, the principal medieval work on writing and grammar (Reynolds 1996, 7–16). Furthermore, the evidence of illegible or pseudo-inscriptions on coin-brooches would suggest that there may more often have been an *aspiration* to literacy rather than an actual ability to read and write on the part of the owner.

In two articles Elisabeth Okasha has considered the process of carrying out inscriptions and what that implies about relative levels of literacy (1994 & 1995). She defined what could be a three stage process of commissioner, composer and maker of a stone inscription such as a memorial stone, or composer, maker and commissioner/owner of an inscribed object such as a ring. Up to three individuals might be responsible for an inscription and only one of these, the composer who laid out an inscription for the maker to carve, need be at all literate.

However in the case of informal inscriptions on small low value objects such as a handle or on trial pieces such as an animal bone, it might be considered more likely that the owner or user was the inscriber. The 'literacy event' (to use Barton's term discussed in the introduction) of inscribing a fossil or a handle would therefore

suggest a degree of spontaneous and confident literacy on the part of the owner. In the case of the Exeter Street fossil inscription one imagines that the owner (possibly the finder?) of the object may have carried out the inscription in order to boost the talismanic value of this rare and curious object. The fact that the inscription does not seem to make much sense suggests that it was done by a person with limited literacy. One might speculate that in the case of the National Portrait Gallery inscription with two names in different hands, the literacy event was conscious experimentation or even a competition of literacy. With the Guildhall Yard and Waltham Abbey trial-pieces the literacy event may well have been the more technical and less spontaneous process of practising the text that a separate composer had prepared. It is however possible that the Guildhall Yard artisan was practising writing his or her own name rather than practising the name of a client for a commissioned inscription, though this is of course hard to demonstrate.

The evidence for coin legends suggests a variable but generally improving standard of literacy on the part of the moneyers and die cutters. As we saw earlier the Kentish moneyer Pada betrayed his lack of familiarity with roman script but also demonstrated his runic literacy by spelling his own name very clearly. Later coins have quite reasonable roman script legends, though these are apt to degrade as they are re-executed by successive die-cutters. This would imply a greater degree of literacy on the part of the moneyer than the more lowly die cutters (Page 1973, 121–2).

Relationship of monastic and secular literacy

Let us consider first the 'literacy events' that led to short texts being inscribed on scraps of bone and personal objects in the narrow streets and small houses of the 8th-century trading settlement of *Lundenwic*. The impression given by the inscriptions on the Royal Opera House handle, the Exeter Street fossil and the National Portrait Gallery vertebra is that they demonstrate a separate secular literacy on the part of artisans and traders, admittedly of a relatively crude standard compared to the monastic *scriptorium*.

In the case of the trial piece inscriptions, and the texts on luxury objects such as the Putney knife, it could be argued that though the artisan carrying out the inscription is presumably secular, the composer of the inscription could have learned the skills of literacy in a church or monastic context. Elsewhere, inscriptions from monastic sites such as Lindisfarne may well demonstrate links between the monastic literacy of the *scriptorium* and secular literacy of inscriptions (Higgitt 1990). In London it is harder to make that link but it seems probable that the later memorial inscriptions such as the Anglo-Danish runic memorial stone from St Paul's or the stones from All Hallows-by-the-Tower do have some such secular/Church link. In these cases, where the inscribed stone rests in church ground, it may be the case that the composer of the inscription was a member of the clergy and the carver of the inscription was in some way connected to or employed by the church.

Function of inscriptions

The limited nature of the function of inscriptions from Saxon London can be illustrated if we take two other examples from different times and places. The letters from the Roman frontier fort at Vindolanda from the end of the 1st century give us an important insight into a society where 'literacy practices' include keeping military inventories, organising specific trade transactions and even sending an invitation to a birthday party (Bowman & Thomas 1994, nos 184, 343 & 291). Similarly at Bergen in Norway in the 13th century, runic inscribed sticks or *rúnakefli* were used for equally varied purposes including commercial documents, owner's marks, messages and charms (Page 1973, 98–102). The trade network of Saxon London is beginning to be better understood (see Vince 1990 and Malcolm *et al* forthcoming) but, according to current evidence at least, it seems that this network was not directly supported by a culture of literacy such as existed later in Bergen or earlier at Vindolanda.[26] Instead the evidence from Saxon London would suggest that, outside of the monastic or royal milieu, writing had a purpose more demonstrative than functional. With a number of inscriptions we have seen, from luxury objects such as the Thames Exchange ring to less valuable objects like the Royal Opera House handle, the writing seems intended to decorate or complement the object and perhaps provide associations of wealth, status or power that writing had come to symbolise.

Is London a special case?

For stone memorial inscriptions it can be argued that London is a special case in a negative sense – only three are known compared to many more from Lindisfarne or York for example. The area where London does seem to be a 'special case' is the number of low status inscriptions on small objects and trial pieces. This probably reflects the density of recent archaeological excavation more than any greater degree of secular literacy in Anglo-Saxon times.

However it might be reasonable to suggest that from about the 8th century London had a unique combination of monastic and other religious institutions such as St Paul's, secular power centres such as Chelsea and Westminster, and thriving commercial zones such as *Lundenwic* and later the river port in the City. The evidence from extensive excavation in both the City and *Lundenwic* might suggest that this combination of factors resulted in increasing levels of secular literacy. Much of this literacy may have been of a very simple nature such as the attempt to carve one's own or another's name on a small bone fragment or a treasured amulet. By the later Anglo-Saxon period it seems that the inscriptions on memorial stones, rings, coins, imported swords and other weapons, together with other visible examples of writing in churches, might be aimed at a partly literate 'readership'. This readership may not have been fully literate but perhaps could understand simple inscriptions such as names and would have associated writing with power and status and so aspired to use and own the written word.

NOTES

[1] The bibliography in Barton's recent work on literacy (1994) numbers 13 dense pages.

[2] My figures gloss over problems of definition of what constitutes a memorial and what counts as an inscription.

[3] Documentary references and architectural details confirm that the village and church of Orpington existed at least by the early 11th century and there are possible links with Christ Church, Canterbury and the court of Canute (Glover 1976; All Saints Orpington 1980).

[4] Surrey County Council, Guildford, Sites and Monuments Record, 4km radius search based on TQ 4053. I am grateful to Dinah Saich of the county Archaeological Service for carrying out this search.

[5] Raymond Page (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge) and Gary Brown (Pre-Construct Archaeology), pers comm.

[6] See Page (1997) on the uses and cross-fertilisation of runic and roman scripts. Two runes, *wynn* and *thorn*, passed into the Anglo-Saxon roman script alphabet (Page 1997, 127–8).

[7] Nick Bateman (supervisor of MoLAS Guildhall Yard excavations) pers comm.

[8] Temple sword in British Museum: Davidson 1962, 45; Oakeshott 1951, 69–71. Kew sword in British Museum: Lang & Ager 1989, 106. The other sword is in the Museum of London, no. A2373. Though there is some doubt about the exact provenance, the two parts were found separately, probably by the Thames at Putney.

[9] Battersea sword: Wilson 1965. The other sword is in the Tullie House Museum, Carlisle (no. OM 325) and is recorded as coming from 'the Thames'. It was found by a Mr. Bonnett of Holborn in 1840 so it may well have a central London provenance (Tim Padley, Tullie House curator, pers. comm.). See also Cowen 1934, 170 & 181–2.

[10] A British Museum sword from the Thames near Westminster has inscribed crosses and loops perhaps imitating 'Ulfberht' swords. Another British Museum sword from a former bed of the River Lea near Edmonton has a cross, loops and what might be the beginning of the 'Ingelrii' maker's mark: Lang & Ager 1989, 103–6.

[11] e.g. British Library Cotton Augustus II.29 (c.686–8, altered in 8th century): *ChLA*, no.187 (see also Webster & Backhouse 1991, 44–5); Bodleian Library Bodley 155 (1974) (11th or 12th century): Ker 1990, no.303.

[12] e.g. British Library Cotton Augustus II 82 (late 8th century, probably St. Paul's): *ChLA* no.188; Cambridge Corpus Christi College 383 (11th or 12th century): Ker 1990, no.65.

[13] e.g. Oxford Bodleian Eng. hist. a. 2, no. XII (998, possibly original copy): Keynes 1991, no.14. The Ordnance Survey volumes of facsimiles known as *OSF* list several probable pre-Conquest Westminster manuscripts (perhaps as many as 18 though some may be later forgeries) beginning in the late 10th century. The British Library volumes of facsimiles known as *BMF* list five 11th century manuscripts. It should be noted however that the palaeographic notes (including dating and provenance) in these two 19th century editions are not as extensive or reliable as more recent works such as Keynes 1991 or *ChLA*.

[14] Two manuscripts in particular may be originals of land grants dating to 785 and 788, both signed by King Offa of Mercia (with a probably autograph †), the Archbishop of Canterbury and various bishops: British Library Stowe Charter 5 (*ChLA* no.222) and Canterbury Cathedral Chapter Library, Charta Antiqua M.340 (Red or Chapter Book no.II) (*ChLA* no.235).

[15] Bruckner describes the hand as a 'Chancery minuscule native to Canterbury', quite possibly the same scribe who wrote some extant Canterbury documents: *ChLA*, vol. 4, xviii.
[16] Christopher Thomas (supervisor of MoLAS Westminster excavations), pers comm. See also Sullivan 1994 (56–63 and plate 5).
[17] See Gneuss 1981 and the negative evidence in *CLA* (index of provenance in supplement, p.84), Alexander 1978 and Temple 1976 (index of provenance in respective appendices).
[18] Oxford, Bodley, 155 (1974) (Gneuss 1981, no.554); Dublin, Trinity College 176 (E.5.28) (Gneuss 1981, no.216).
[19] British Library Cotton Domitian IX, fol.11 (Gneuss 1981, no.330); Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 383 (Gneuss 1981, no.102).
[20] Cambridge, Trinity College O.7.37 (1365) (Gneuss 1981, no.197).
[21] Westminster Abbey Muniment 67209 (Page 1996).
[22] These are approximate figures based on the proportion of London manuscripts in relation to others of known provenance described in *ChLA*, *BMF*, *OSF*, Keynes 1991, Ker 1990 and Gneuss 1981.
[23] Museum Of London, nos. 1254 & 15193. Other Museum of London styli may be Saxon and not Roman: nos. 1300 and 73.52/4 (pers comm John Clark). Other bone pins with triangular heads could be interpreted as styli such as one illustrated in Smith (1923, 113, fig. 140).
[24] For example from Breamore (Hampshire), Dewsbury (West Yorkshire), St Nicholas' Ipswich (Suffolk): Okasha 1971, nos. 15, 31, 58.
[25] We might however be cautious in using such examples to infer literacy on the part of a 'readership' since it has been suggested that the intended audience might be divine rather than human (Okasha 1995, 71 and see Page 1997, 129).
[26] There are however several late 7th and 8th century charters which indicate that London's trade was being regulated by Royal authority (Vince 1990, 103–5).

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