

# Senses of the Past: The Old English Vocabulary of History

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The Anglo-Saxons had a sophisticated and complex sense of history. That much is agreed upon by most Anglo-Saxonists today. The exact nature of this sense of the past, however, remains elusive and contradictory. The issue has been addressed repeatedly, not without significant results.<sup>1</sup> Scholarship on this matter usually takes one of two paths which could be labelled ‘Bede’ and ‘*Beowulf*.’ The first approach sees Bede, in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, as the Anglo-Saxon representative of ‘standard’ early medieval historiography (together with Isidore of Seville, Gregory of Tours, and others), whose sense of the past was heavily informed by Latinate and Christian sensibilities, but who works with native material.<sup>2</sup> The second sees *Beowulf* as the source of an original Anglo-Saxon understanding of history rooted in the legendary historical consciousness of Germanic heroic verse. For Bede (but also Ælfric or Alfred), history is a teleological (because divine) process of salvation of an entire *gens* — thus, historiography becomes a kind of “historical theology.”<sup>3</sup> For the anonymous poets of *Beowulf*, *The Fight at Finnsburg*, and *Waldere*, history entails

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1 For the scholarly debate on literary sources, see, among others, Tennenhouse, “*Beowulf* and the Sense of History”; Hanning, “*Beowulf* as Heroic History”; Frank, “The *Beowulf* Poet’s Sense of History”; Tyler, “Poetics and the Past”; and finally, the most extensive study so far, Trilling, *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia*.

2 For debates on “official” historical sources, see Wormald, “Bede, the *Bretwaldas* and the Origins of the *Gens Anglorum*”; Mayr-Harting, “Bede’s Patristic Thinking”; and, more recently, Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede*.

3 Goetz, “Historical Consciousness,” 352.

both re-creating the ancient world of the heroic age and, at the same time, mourning its passing, though it also involves negotiating present realities with its help.<sup>4</sup> Most scholars agree that there is a disjunction between these two cultural horizons and choose one or the other for framing their subject of enquiry. Under these conditions, modern understanding of the greater spectrum of Anglo-Saxon attitudes towards history is bound to be fragmented.<sup>5</sup> There have been attempts to bridge this gap and to counter the assumption that 'Bede' and 'Beowulf' are antagonistic approaches to history (or, indeed, that they are the only possible ones), yet even the most extensive study to date still works with this dichotomy.<sup>6</sup>

However, if one thinks about the terms of this dichotomy as occasionally overlapping areas of a wider spectrum of possible conceptualizations of history and the past, the disjunction is overcome, but the need emerges for a comprehensive, integrative study of this whole spectrum.<sup>7</sup> Such an all-encompassing project would involve an exploration of the entire corpus of both Old English and Anglo-Latin writing to discern all the conceptualizations of history almost never explicitly theorized but always discreetly implicit in the texts. What I propose here is a simpler way to access this variety of attitudes by means of examining all words for the notion of 'history' spread throughout the Anglo-Saxon corpus and charting their meanings. After all, individual words are the nodes of meaning which together realize and transmit 'a sense of the past,' and mapping the semantic field of 'history' in Old English reveals the ways in which Anglo-Saxons thought about writing/performing history and conceptualized the past.<sup>8</sup>

This paper, then, is a lexical and semantic study of the Old English vocabulary of history. Borrowing insights from cognitive linguistics, the following sketch of an

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4 Trilling, *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia*, 10-18.

5 For a useful summary of the critiques of the orality/literacy "Great Divide" model, see Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition*, 1-32.

6 Trilling, *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia*, 20-21, argues against this antagonism, but on pp. 22-23 she discreetly restates the terms of the dichotomy, laying the foundation for her subsequent study of the aesthetics of nostalgia (more characteristic of "a Beowulfian aesthetic" than of Bede's "inexorably forward" vision of history). For bridging the gap, see Innes, "Introduction," *The Uses of the Past*, 1-8.

7 Orality and literacy are not separate states but rather "the end points on a continuum through which the technology of writing affects and modifies human perception"; O'Brien O'Keefe, *Visible Song*, 13.

8 For a similar approach, see Hall, *Elves*, 2-16.

Anglo-Saxon model of cultural conceptualizations of history encompasses all areas of the spectrum mentioned above, integrating the different ways of conceptualizing history present in (and across) the two Anglo-Saxon cultural worlds which have mainly been seen in disjunction. Without dismissing the binary model as meaningless, as a mere imposition of modern thought on medieval realities, I argue that the dominant ways of thinking about history are essentially the same across genres, cultural codes, and textual communities in Anglo-Saxon England, differing only in their modes of manifestation. What words did the Anglo-Saxons use for the concept of ‘history’? In a nutshell, they both translated Latin historiographical notions and adapted native words, transferring them from day-to-day speech to the sphere of scholarship. These two strategies produced a wide array of complementary yet quite different history-words covering a variety of shades of meaning, all of which are invaluable in uncovering Anglo-Saxon ideas about history. Hence, I will first examine prose attestations and then compare them with evidence of a different nature found in verse, in order to ascertain the mental deep structures underlying the different ways of encoding the notion of ‘history’ (be they words, phrases, or figures of speech in the former case, or associative patterns — emotions and social roles and situations — in the latter).

One of the main obstacles to investigating the semantics of Old English terms becomes apparent even in a simple search of the *Thesaurus of Old English*.<sup>9</sup> The form in which *TOE* lists its words is what could be called ‘notional trees,’ semantic hierarchies going from eighteen very general categories (‘mental faculties,’ ‘emotion,’ ‘life and death,’ and so forth) to subdivisions of ever narrower semantic spheres. Several such notional trees point to ‘history’ words:

- 02. Life and Death
- 02. Creation
- 02.03. Humankind
- 02.03.02. Family/household
- 02.03.02.03. Ancestry, descent
- framcynn, woruldgebyrd, cynnreccenes, folctalu, mæggewrit, mægracu*
- 06. Mental Faculties
- 06. Spirit, soul, heart

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9 Roberts and Kay, *A Thesaurus of Old English*, <<http://libra.englang.arts.gla.ac.uk/oethesaurus>>.

06.01. The head (as seat of thought)

06.01.04. Faculty of memory  
*gemynd, fyrngemynd, efengemynd, læran*

And stemming from “06.01. The head”:

06.01.07. Truth, conformity with absolute standard

06.01.07.03. Truth of speech or thought, veracity  
*soþcwed*

09. Language and Communication

09. Speech, vocal utterance

09.03. A language

09.03.07. Writing

09.03.07.07. A book

09.03.07.07.03. Composition, arrangement, writing

09.03.07.07.03.04. Chronicle, annals, history  
*cranic, woruldgewritu, gewyrdelic*

The results of the search all belong to the wider semantic field of ‘history,’ although each word instantiates slightly different aspects of the central concept of ‘history’ by translating different mental images into different verbal forms. For instance, heroic verse like *Beowulf* often refers to the ancestry, descent, or origin (*framcynn, cynnreccenes*, and the like) of people but also objects — what is meant by this is a personal history, hence according to the *Thesaurus* classification, it is listed as type “02.03.02.03. Ancestry, descent” under the general category of “02. Life and Death.” In the same type of cultural horizon, collective, oral, memorial forms of history are at other times instantiated as ‘old memories’ or ‘old lore’ (the *gemynd* composites), hence “06.01.04. Faculty of memory” under “06. Mental Faculties.” The truthfulness of these memorial narratives is also emphasized in *soþcwed* (“06.01.07.03. Truth of speech or thought, veracity,” also under “06. Mental Faculties”). In the cultural horizon of Bede, Alfred, and Latinate culture, history often takes the form of chronicles, annals (“09.03.07.07.03.04. Chronicle, annals, history” under “09. Language and Communication”). All these Old English words codify different shades of meaning of history as perceived by the speakers of the language, yet they can be translated into Modern English only by means of the single word ‘history.’ It is, of course, true that Modern English also has words such as *account, recollection, memory, narrative, anecdote*, and *treatise* for different forms of historical discourse, yet we still

cannot capture the semantic subtleties of the Old English terms in translation simply because the two series of semantically related words belong to two different cultural horizons and thus there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between Old and Modern English lexemes. The modern words pertaining to the semantic spheres of history and, more generally, narrative date back to the Norman-French wave of lexical innovation and therefore do not have Old English etymons. Although Old English *istoria/stær* and Modern English *history* share the classical Latin etymon *historia*, the latter does not directly descend from the former, having subsequently been re-borrowed from Anglo-Norman and Old French *istorie~estoire*.<sup>10</sup> Like ‘story,’ the other more specialized terms for historical narrative (‘chronicle’/‘chronique,’ ‘res gestae,’ ‘annals,’ ‘archive,’ even ‘memory’) are borrowings from Norman French or Latin.

Undoubtedly, the *Thesaurus* is an invaluable tool for any Anglo-Saxonist. Yet, was this the way Anglo-Saxons categorized their concepts?<sup>11</sup> It is true that the *Thesaurus* does not claim that its notional trees are faithful images of Anglo-Saxon hierarchies of meaning — they are simply useful ways of organizing data for use by modern scholars. But what might genuine Anglo-Saxon notional trees have looked like? Or, indeed, in what other forms did Anglo-Saxons mentally organize such conceptualizations? Beyond the multiple history-words encountered in Anglo-Saxon sources there lie several dominant cultural conceptualizations of the past and its recording in writing or oral traditions which also shed light on the larger issue of accessing medieval mentalities, being quite different from the ways we think about history today.

But what do words indicate about the mental patterns underlying them? Cognitive linguistics can provide not only empirical support to the age-old intuition that mentalities and worldviews can be gleaned from texts, but also very helpful conceptual models and methodologies for using such windows on the past to reach the deep structures of mentality.<sup>12</sup> For cognitive linguistics sees language not so much as a means of communication, but rather as an instrument for organizing and processing knowledge which directly reflects the nature and structure of thoughts and mental patterns.<sup>13</sup> A very recent contribution to the field, Farzad Sharifian’s *Cultural*

10 *Oxford English Dictionary* (Historical Thesaurus), s.v. *History*.

11 For similar questions and helpful answers regarding the validity of the way TOE organizes its entries and semantic hierarchies, see Hall, *Elves*, 9-11, and Anderson, *Folk-Taxonomies*, 20-42.

12 For convincing pleas for cognitivist approaches to Old English texts, see Lockett, *Anglo-Saxon Psychologies*, 3-16, and Harbus, *Cognitive Approaches*, 1-23.

13 Geeraerts and Cuyckens, “Introducing Cognitive Linguistics,” 3.

*Conceptualisations and Language*, takes this approach a step further to decode conceptualizations of entire cultures which are encoded in the fabric of language. Sharifian posits that the lexicon of a language is “the most direct link with cultural conceptualisations in the sense that lexical items largely act as labels, and hence ‘memory banks,’ for conceptualisations that are culturally constructed.”<sup>14</sup>

Cultural conceptualizations are the products of human collective cognition, that is, they are developed through “interactions between the members of a cultural group and enable them to think as if in one mind, somehow more or less in a similar fashion.”<sup>15</sup> Yet they are not “things” in the mind but “patterns which emerge from knowledge which is represented in a distributed fashion across the network,” being negotiated and renegotiated in time, across generations and in space, between cultural sub-groups.<sup>16</sup> Cultural conceptualizations are thus not only collective but also distributed differently across the minds constituting a cultural group: they are not homogeneously accepted and adhered to by all its members. What makes them representative of a specific culture is that over time, “such dynamic systems may act as major anchor points for people’s thought and behaviour and may even constitute a worldview,” that is, a “group-level cognitive system.”<sup>17</sup> These realities will be amply demonstrated in Anglo-Saxon contexts.

Unsurprisingly, most of the individual history-words analysed here come from prose translations and glosses, where they are used to translate Latin concepts belonging to the semantic field of ‘history,’ usually *historia* or derivatives thereof. None of the extant writing in Old English was authored by the illiterate population at large (in the midst of which an oral literary tradition was undoubtedly still alive) — it was written by Christian clerics who had been educated in Latin.<sup>18</sup> Since in this type of cultural milieu, the activity of history-writing was at least declaratively rooted in the late antique Christian tradition of historiography, the Anglo-Saxon glossators and translators had to invent new words for this foreign conceptualization of history. They borrowed Latin words (*historia* > OE *stær*, *chronica* > OE *cranic*), coined novel compounds (*gerecednys*, *spellcwide* etc.), or simply used existing words in new, more specialized ways (*spell* and *sægen*, words already having a wide semantic range which could be extended to accommodate new senses).

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14 Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 39.

15 Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 5.

16 Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 4.

17 Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 26 and 5.

18 Opland, *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry*, 231.

However, the apparently skewed distribution of Old English history-related words favouring those belonging to the world of Anglo-Saxon Latinate learning over those found in verse is not the result of a lack of a sense of history in oral vernacular mentalities but is the natural consequence of a difference in conceptualizing history. Thus, the translation and glossing of Latin works and words took place in the context of Anglo-Saxon cultural milieus that were trying to adopt classically inspired notions of history into an Anglo-Saxon context. Rooted in the tradition of Isidore, Orosius (and hence, Augustine) but also drawing on pre-Christian Greek and Roman authors, this type of historiography is naturally based on Aristotelian and Ciceronian taxonomies.<sup>19</sup> Hence, the terms pertaining to these cultural endeavours and communities are more likely to be based on categorical (taxonomical) conceptualizations — which include concepts that enter into an ‘x is a kind of y’ association. Even so, they are not mere calques of Latin notions, but creative adaptations, as will be seen below. On the other hand, history-related words feature abundantly in more traditional vernacular forms of writing such as ‘heroic’ verse, but they belong to schematic types of conceptualization. They are more likely to be associated with specific situations (oral recitation by a *scop*, declaring the king or hero’s lineage to a friend or a foe) or emotions (nostalgia, the *dream* in the mead-hall) rather than being clearly set in taxonomic relationships to each other. Due to these differences in the way the conceptualizations of history are embedded in the text, I use somewhat different methodologies (although both circumscribed by cognitive linguistics) for each of these modes of thought. The first section below traces the etymology and history of the use of specific words encountered in prose texts and glosses to Latin sources by comparing their semantic sphere to that of Latin terms or other Old English words. The second part of the paper examines entire passages (rather than individual words) drawn from verse texts, deriving insights from the part they play in the economy of the text (mainly *Beowulf*) as a whole.

The following section tracks the vocabulary of history found in prose texts and glosses, using those of Bosworth-Toller’s definitions which are borne out by the context in which the particular words are found. Of the two Latin loans, the first occurs very frequently in Anglo-Saxon writing. The preferred Latinate word (with

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19 Isidore, *Etymologies* 1.44 (p. 67), drawing on Cicero’s *De inventione*, classifies narrative in a tripartite taxonomy: “Histories [*historiae*] are true deeds that have happened, plausible narrations [*argumental*] are things that, even if they have not happened, nevertheless could happen, and fables [*fabulae*] are things that have not happened and cannot happen, because they are contrary to nature.” For an extensive study of Isidorian categorizations of narrative, see Mehtonen, *Old Concepts*, 12-31.

twenty-three occurrences throughout the corpus) for a historiographic account is **stær**, used by translators into Old English of Bede and Orosius and by the glossator of Aldhelm to translate the Latin *historia*. As is the case with *historia*, *stær* refers not to historical events, but to their narration. Thus, the translator of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* speaks of narrating events "in ðissum ussum stære" (in this our history) and "in þis user ciriclice stær" (in this our church history), possibly indicating the semantic value of the word in learned milieus.<sup>20</sup> Its two derivatives, terms denoting the professionals of the discipline, are **stærleornere** 'a historical scholar' and **stærwritere** 'a writer of history, a historian': "swa swa sopsagal stærwritere þa þing þe be him oððe þurh hine gewordene wæron, ic awrat" (like a truthful historian I wrote about what was done by him or through him).<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, *stær* is an indirect loan from Latin, one of the small number of loans coming from Goidelic Celtic associated with Christianity, and thus probably borrowed from Irish missionaries,<sup>22</sup> possibly during the influx of Irish learning starting with Aidan's mission of 635 to Northumbria at the behest of King Oswald. The very fact of borrowing a term for 'history' is a result of the conceptual foreignness mentioned above, and the Irish cultural world happened to be the first source for this specific conception of history (rooted in the classical tradition) with which Anglo-Saxon cultural elites became acquainted. Later on, when the opening towards Latin learning via Rome superseded the ties with Ireland, the term *historia* was borrowed again, this time directly, as **istoria**. The greatest concentration of *stær* can be found in the Old English translation of Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* and the glosses on Aldhelm's prose *De laudibus virginitatis* (but also twice in the Old English Orosius, in the compound *stærwritere*).<sup>23</sup> However, (*h*)*istoria* is a favourite of Ælfric's — his homilies and *Grammar* account for roughly one-third of all the occurrences of the word,<sup>24</sup> this difference between the early Alfredian and the late Ælfrician West Saxon use of *historia* derivatives may be due to the early cultural influence of Irish learning on the former and of later cultural ties to Rome on the latter. The other Latin loan

20 Miller, ed. and trans., *The Old English Version of Bede*, 4.30 (1:378.8) for the former, and 4.7 (1:282.23-24) and 4.22 (1:330.24-25) for the latter. The translations throughout this article are my own unless otherwise indicated.

21 For *stærleornere*, see Bouterwek, "Angelsächsische Glossen," 503; for *stærwritere*, see Miller, ed. and trans., *The Old English Version of Bede*, 3.17 (1:206.5-6).

22 Lass, *Old English*, 189.

23 Cf. *Dictionary of Old English Corpus*, available at <<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doecorpus/>>.

24 Cf. *DOE Corpus*.



was a more specialized term for historical narrative, **cranic** ‘chronicle’: “swa swa Hieronimus sæde syððan on his cranice” (as Jerome said in his chronicle),<sup>25</sup> with its derivative **cranicwritera** ‘chroniclers’ (glossing “chronographorum”).<sup>26</sup> These words seem to be especially popular in late Old English homilies.<sup>27</sup>

With regard to the many native Old English compounds, the main difficulty in correctly identifying history-words lies in separating those which mean simply ‘narrative in general’ and those more specialized to denote specifically ‘historical narrative accounts.’ In fact, as will be seen, this separation would have appeared somewhat meaningless to Anglo-Saxon thought: history and narrative (even in the sense of ‘fiction, fabulation’) are so greatly overlapping semantic fields as to be virtually indistinguishable. In this respect, they are remarkably close to recent understandings of history which posit that the only thing historians *can* do is tell stories about the past applying a fictional matrix.<sup>28</sup> There seem to be slightly more specialized terms, however, that would correspond to a relative differentiation of history within the narrative spectrum: **ealdspræc** ‘an old speech, history’;<sup>29</sup> **ealdwritere** ‘a writer on ancient history,’ and **ealdspell** ‘old story, history’: “Ælfred us eald-spell reahte” (Alfred told us an old story).<sup>30</sup> The conceptualization underlying this series of terms built around *eald* seems to be that history is the narration of things past, of old, ancient events. For a different perspective, there is **endebyrdnes**, meaning primarily ‘a row, series, rank,’ but also ‘succession in place or time,’ and hence ‘narrative or statement in which circumstances are stated in proper order.’ It can also mean ‘a regular narrative, a series of statements’: “we habbað nu micle maran endebyrdnyse þære Cristes bec gesæd þonne ðis dægðerlice godspel behæfð” (we have mentioned many more stories of which the books about Christ tell than are contained in the gospel for the day).<sup>31</sup> For a similar understanding of history, **getæl** ‘a number, series, reckoning, computation’: “heo [. . .] heht hine [Cædmon] læran þæt getæl þæs halgan stæres 7 spelles” (Abess Hild commanded [them] to teach him

25 Ælfric, “Homily,” in Assmann, *Angelsächsische Homilien*, 79, line 164.

26 Napier, *Old English Glosses*, 156 (no. 24).

27 Cf. DOE Corpus.

28 White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 30.

29 Leo, *Angelsächsisches Glossar*, 149.

30 Tupper, ed. and trans., *The Anglo-Saxon Version of the Metres of Boethius*, 263.

31 Thorpe, ed. and trans., *The Homilies of Ælfric*, 1:220.

[Cædmon] the series of the holy story and narrative).<sup>32</sup> The latter term is of course derived from **talū** ‘a tale, talk, story, account’: “Þa [. . .] spræcon hi betwux him [. . .], and seo modor sæt geornlice hlystende hire tale” (then they spoke among them and the mother sat earnestly listening to their talk/account).<sup>33</sup> In both *getæl* and *endebyrdnes* the underlying conceptualization is that of order, of a series of events narrated in the proper order. In this, it is akin to the Old Norse *telja* ‘to (re)count, reckon, enumerate,’ which preserves both ideas of ‘number’ and ‘story.’<sup>34</sup>

As can already be seen, the semantic field of Old English history-words cannot be easily separated from that of generic ‘narrative.’ There is a small but diverse lexical family centred on **reccing** or *rece(d)ness~rece(d)nyss* ‘a story, narrative, history’ (glossing *historiae* and *ecclesiasticae liber*):<sup>35</sup> **cynnrecceniss** ‘a reckoning of relationship, a genealogy’ (in one manuscript, it glosses the Latin incipit of the Matthew Gospel “De generatione Iesu Christi”)<sup>36</sup> as well as *gerecednes* (glossing *expositionibus, narrationibus, relatione*) ‘a narration, history, report.’<sup>37</sup> Here, history is conceptualized as a reckoning, the unfolding of a tale in due order (but also the enumeration of generations in a genealogy). The senses of *reccan* extend to expounding a meaning, unravelling a riddle, but also correcting — hence, history as a narration, a succession of events, thus potentially a good story, but also a narrative with a meaning to be discerned, a moral, and perhaps even a (theological) meaning.

An atypical gloss for *historia* used several times is **gewyrd**. The Bosworth-Toller definition for *gewyrd* is ‘event, fate, destiny, condition,’ but in Aldhelm’s *De laudibus virginitatis*, it is used to gloss a variety of partially overlapping meanings: ‘fortune’ (*fortuna*),<sup>38</sup> ‘one of the Fates’ (*parcarum*),<sup>39</sup> ‘fate’ (*fatus, ta, tum*),<sup>40</sup> ‘historically’ (*gewyrdelice, historialiter*),<sup>41</sup> and the specialized agentive term ‘historiographer’

32 Miller, ed. and trans., *Old English Bede*, 4.24 (1:344.32-346.1).

33 Skeat, ed., *Ælfric’s Lives of Saints*, 2:210.

34 Slocum and Krause, *Old Norse Online*, available at <<http://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/lrc/eieol/norol-BF-X.html>>.

35 Napier, *Old English Glosses*, 61 (no. 2272-73), 78 (no. 2900).

36 Skeat, ed., *The Holy Gospels*, 1:25.

37 Goossens, ed., *The Old English Glosses*, 222 (no. 1135), 250 (no. 1591).

38 Napier, *Old English Glosses*, 71 (no. 2628).

39 Napier, *Old English Glosses*, 138 (no. 5480).

40 Napier, *Old English Glosses*, 187 (no. 32).

41 Goossens, ed., *The Old English Glosses*, 417 (no. 4141).

(*wyrdwritere* glosses “historiografhus [*sic*], historiam conscribens”).<sup>42</sup> In prose contexts, the translation as ‘fate’ could be a modern reading exoticizing the more mundane meaning of ‘event.’ Still, *wyrd* certainly belongs at least etymologically to the semantic field of ‘fate.’<sup>43</sup> What exactly this entails in terms of the concept in the minds of actual users of the word is open to interpretation: one may conclude that the underlying conceptualization is that of ‘event, series of events,’ hence ‘history.’ Nevertheless, since fate was seen to have an important role in everyday life, history could be seen as the result (or embodiment) of destiny, or, in a Christian interpretation, history as divinely foreordained events.<sup>44</sup> The transition to a more theological key of interpretation could have been easily made in this case: (*ge*)*wyrd* as history could have been underpinned (for the select few) by a Christian Augustinian view of history as a foreordained series of events whose deeper sense remains unknown to people unless enlightened by God’s revelation, the historian (*wyrdwritere*) being the one who can understand and record the true course of history.

Among less contentious Old English words, another term for history is **sopsagu** (compare ON *sannsaga* ‘a true tale’) ‘true speech, a history’ (in one manuscript of the Gospels it glosses *historiae*),<sup>45</sup> emphasizing the ‘truthful narration’ aspect of history, though, of course, ‘true’ does not necessarily mean ‘factual.’ The etymon of the compound *sopsagu* is the more general term (with some seventy occurrences) **sægen**, which usually denotes ‘a saying, statement, assertion’ but also ‘tradition, report, story’: “ic wolde 3ewitan hweþer sio se3en soð wære þe me mon ær be þon sæ3de” (I wanted to know whether the story I had been told about it before was true);<sup>46</sup> and hence, also history as an account handed down orally from one person to another or from one generation to the next. Here, history as a form of oral memorial tradition is acknowledged in the sphere of clerical culture (which may have led to the adoption of the term therein).

The other very general term that means both ‘narrative’ and ‘history’ is **spell** (also a very widely used word, with hundreds of occurrences in the corpus and an exceptionally large and complex lexical family), usually meaning ‘a story, narrative, account, relation’ but also ‘a historical narrative, history.’ Hence the Latin “historiam

42 Napier, *Old English Glosses*, 53 (no. 1971).

43 For a recent assessment of the semantics of *wyrd*, see Pollack, “Engendering *Wyrd*.”

44 Green, *Language and History*, 381-91.

45 Kemble, ed., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew in Anglo-Saxon*, 7, 9.

46 Cockayne, ed., “*Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem*,” 24.

abbatum monasterii hujus in libellis duobus descripsi” (I wrote the *History of the Abbots* of that monastery in two books) is interestingly translated as “Para abbuda stær 7 spel þisses mynstres, on [. . .] twam bocum ic awrat,” which supplies a double gloss for the original *historia*: *stær* and *spell*, and thus “I wrote the history and narrative (or perhaps: words, sayings) of the abbots of that monastery in two books.”<sup>47</sup> The term *spell* has an extremely wide semantic range: it can mean ‘a false or foolish story, a fable’: “ealdra cwena spell” (old wives’ tales)<sup>48</sup> but also ‘an instructive talk, a philosophical argument’ and even ‘a sermon, homily,’ as in “Ðæt nis to spelle ac elles to rædenne” (it is not to be taken as a sermon, but to be read otherwise).<sup>49</sup> It has many derivatives, some of which are expressly used as history-words: **ealdspell** (‘old story’), **soþspell** ‘a true story, history’ (glossing *historia*).<sup>50</sup> Some forms of history are felt to be more truthful than the others: “ciricalicra saegde soðspell” (narrated the ecclesiastical (true-)history),<sup>51</sup> especially since this use of the term features in the context of heresy and fighting for truth whereas in other, similar contexts the more neutral *spell*, not *soðspell* is used. An even more interesting compound is **spellcwide** ‘historical narrative, the language of history’: “ic wolde geseccgan, cwæð Orosius, hu Creca gewinn [angan], þe of Læ[ce]demonia ðære byrg ærest onsteled wæs, 7 mid spellcwidum gemearcian” (I intended to tell, says Orosius, how the strife of the Greeks was first initiated from the city of the Lacedaemonians, and describe it in the language of history),<sup>52</sup> being used here as a description for the specialized type of discourse proper to the historian and thus set apart from simple *spell*, mere ‘narration.’

The extreme range of *spell* actually parallels that of the Latin *fabula* as used in early medieval historiography: Bede and Isidore, like many others, warn against the dangers of listening to idle *confabulationes*, yet they make use of classical fables.<sup>53</sup> However, for Gregory of Tours and Fredegar, being “iocundus in fabolis” was apparently the attribute of a likeable man and a competent politician. Misleading advice is usually called *fabula ficta*, but the parables of Christ are occasionally called *fabulae*,

47 Miller, ed. and trans., *The Old English Version of Bede*, 5.23 (1:484.15-16).

48 Wright, ed., *A Volume of Vocabularies*, 55.

49 Cockayne, ed. and trans., *Leechdoms* 3:232.

50 Kemble, ed., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew in Anglo-Saxon*, 9.

51 Skeat, ed., *The Holy Gospels*, 1:5-8.

52 Batley, ed., *The Old English Orosius*, 3:1 (p. 55).

53 Bede, *Epistola ad Ecgbertum*, 4, 17; Isidore, *Etymologies* 1.44 (p. 67).

too.<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, the Anglo-Saxons did not see anything wrong with equating *fabula* and *historia* (the two terms which are opposite, at least in theory, in the classical and early medieval, classically-rooted historiographical tradition).<sup>55</sup> The Latin *fabula* is glossed, just like *historia*, either with *spellung*, for example, in “sæ3don me þa unrihtan spellun3e, ah nalys swa swa æ þin drihtyn” (the wicked have told me unjust fables, but not as thy law, Lord),<sup>56</sup> or *raca* as in “stolidas fabulas” glossed as “stunte raca” (foolish stories).<sup>57</sup> The sense is in most cases negative, yet *spellung* seems to accommodate this variety of senses and moral values very well: “stultiloquium et otiosas fabulas” glossed as “stuntspæce 7 idele spellunga” (babbling and vain stories).<sup>58</sup> It is clear that Old English *spell*, closely paralleling Latin *fabula*, encompasses a very large semantic spectrum, some of which is taken up by the notion of ‘history,’ but also by many other meanings which seem incongruous to modern thought.

On the surface, the terms surveyed above do not have much connection to one another apart from having ‘history’ as one of their meanings. Yet this array of lexemes is the closest possible approximation to an Anglo-Saxon taxonomic system of history-words.<sup>59</sup> Admittedly, they are not ordered in proper Aristotelian or Linnaean taxonomies. Instead, this is the way in which these words might have been categorized in the minds of Old English speakers: *ealdspell* and *sopspell* are types of historiographical *spell* (a category described in some contexts by *stær*), which in its turn is a type of *spell* as ‘generic narrative.’ This type of taxonomy is paralleled in the cases of *recedness* and *talū*, which, as folk taxonomies tend to do, present vertical polysemy (whereby the same word is used for both the superordinate category, here ‘generic narrative,’ and for the subordinate, here ‘historical narrative’).<sup>60</sup> Each of them also has subordinate categories which refer to specific nuances of the central concept of ‘historical narrative’ (thus, ‘true history,’ ‘ancestry history,’ ‘old history’).

These subcategories (usually compounds) are organized according to a binary pattern made up of a first element, semantically significant (*eald*, *cyn*, *sop*), and a

54 Gregory of Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, 2.32. Collins, ed., *Die Fredegar-Chroniken*, 3.23, 4.28. Wood, “Fredegar’s Fables,” 360-63.

55 See note 19.

56 *Psalms* 118:85, in Wildhagen, ed., *Der Cambridger Psalter*.

57 “Ælfric Bata’s Version of Ælfric’s Colloquium,” in Napier, *Old English Glosses*, 224 (no. 87).

58 Förster, “Die altenglischen Beigaben,” 329.

59 For such taxonomical systems, see Anderson, *Folk-Taxonomies*.

60 Anderson, *Folk-Taxonomies*, 25-26.

second, lexically significant one (*spell, sagu, talu, recedness*). In other words, the first term of the compound belongs to a set of recurring conceptualizations associated with narrative and history across the Anglo-Saxon spectrum of mentalities ('ancientness,' 'kin/ancestry,' 'truthfulness'), while the second element indicates the type of narrative these concepts are attached to ('story,' 'saying/oral tradition,' 'tale(s),' 'reckoning/series of events'). The words in the first series of terms convey the larger ideas and are embodied by one of the elements in the second series. Anglo-Saxon authors, glossators, and translators seem to combine terms from the two series of elements rather freely in order to attain the right semantic nuance.

Of course, these words belong to the realm of Anglo-Saxon categorical/taxonomical conceptualization. Yet, as will become apparent below, the same recurring conceptualizations of narrative and history ('ancientness,' 'kin/ancestry,' 'truthfulness') are present in oral-derived texts like *Beowulf*, only this time according to schematic patterns of conceptualization. This argument implies the effective unity of the thought patterns concerned with narrative and history across the Anglo-Saxon spectrum of mentalities.

The main point about representations of history in Anglo-Saxon verse is that, unlike those analysed so far, they are not taxonomic conceptualizations but are schematic and therefore "fuzzy," less hierarchically ordered than taxonomies, yet based on ordering principles which are meaningful even if not straightforwardly logical.<sup>61</sup> For example, in an Anglo-Saxon cultural setting, the notions of 'scop' and 'historical account' are related in lexical memory, because they label categories of objects that have been functionally connected and thus are experienced together in the same event; hence, they form a schematic conceptualization (*scop* being a role schema).

Taxonomically organized representations, on the other hand, are based on similarities among the units being represented, that is, they are based on shared meanings.<sup>62</sup> For example, *ealdspræc* and *stær* are related in memory because they refer to categories of historical narrative. Schemas are more characteristic of orality and collective memorial traditions, although, of course, the literary conceit of orality in *Beowulf*, for instance, should not be taken for a pure, untroubled window onto the actual world of oral memorial history, though the illusion is still strong enough even

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61 For the notion of "fuzzy concept," see Lakoff, "Hedges."

62 Sharifian, *Cultural Conceptualisations*, 8-11.

today.<sup>63</sup> We have no unmediated access to the Anglo-Saxon oral culture — we can imagine this world only through its traces in written texts like *Beowulf* (very aptly designated “a pastoral of pre-textuality”), which “outline an imaginary cultural space of their own.”<sup>64</sup> And yet, by the very fact that it celebrates this oral tradition, *Beowulf* — together with other such texts, which are perhaps less self-conscious about it — provides the only possible point of access to this tradition.<sup>65</sup>

There are many types of schematic conceptualizations, three of which are particularly relevant here: role-, event-, and emotion-schemas. Role schemas are knowledge structures that people have about specific social, political, and cultural roles in a group (‘secretary,’ ‘actor,’ ‘CEO,’ and the like), which include sets of behaviours that are expected of those occupying these positions.<sup>66</sup> In Anglo-Saxon oral culture, the persona of the poet, the *scop*, stands for the central role schema related to the preservation and commemoration of the past. A *scop* is familiar with old stories (*gidda gemyndig*) and filled with eloquence (*guma gilphlæden*); his memory is emphasized (*ealdgesegena worn gemunde* [he had in mind a great multitude of ancient stories/traditions]), yet he does not merely imitate old stories, but composes new verse (*word oþer fand*) bound in truth (*sōðe gebunden*).<sup>67</sup> Both verbs are equally significant: *gemunde* ‘remembered’ and *fand* ‘found’ or ‘invented’ — the oral tradition is an interweaving of the warp of remembered narratives and formulas and the weft of innovative performance and incremental creation of new text.<sup>68</sup> This passage also indicates that the fundamental conceptualizations of history instantiated in prose texts (truthfulness, old traditions, history as artful narrative) are present in *Beowulf*, too, even if less overtly.

But schematic conceptualizations of history are not limited to heroic verse, as can be seen in Orosius’s *History*, where the role-schema of ‘historiographer’ partly overlaps with that of ‘poet.’ For instance, Orosius cites Pompeius Trogus as his authority on Joseph’s prediction of the famine in Egypt: “From ðæm Iosepe Sompeius [*sic*] se hæþena scop 7 his cniht Iustinus wæran ðus singende” (From the pagan poet/historian [*historicus* in the original Latin] Pompeius and his epitomizer [*breuiator*]

63 Liuzza, “*Beowulf*: Monuments,” 106-107.

64 Liuzza, “*Beowulf*: Monuments,” 105.

65 Caie, “*Ealdgesegen*,” 111-14.

66 Nishida, “A Cognitive Approach to Intercultural Communication,” 758.

67 Klaeber’s *Beowulf*, 867-76.

68 Caie, “*Ealdgesegen*,” 115.

Justin were thus singing).<sup>69</sup> In the Old English *Orosius*, Homer is called a *scop*, but so is Pompeius, who is clearly designated a historian in the Latin. As in the case of *spell*, the semantic spheres of historiography and fictional narrative/poetic text clash again in the strangely permissive word *scop*, showing the sophisticated Anglo-Saxon understanding of history which embraced poetic manipulation and fictional/narrative distortion.<sup>70</sup>

Event schemas are conceptualizations that are abstracted from the speakers' experience of certain events (for instance, the event schema 'wedding,' which in Western cultures is associated with an array of heterogeneous elements: 'love,' 'altar,' 'wedding ring,' 'white dress,' and so forth). Its very conventionality signals the fact that it is the prevailing cultural schema for this event, even if not all members of the cultural group adhere to it. In the case of Anglo-Saxon literary representations of history inspired by oral culture, the event schema of 'oral recitation' and 'recounting one's ancestry' are recurrent in texts like *Beowulf*. An important element in oral recitation is, as we have seen, the *scop*, the main agent of the event. But there is more to this schema. Texts such as *Beowulf* or *Widsith* never speak of 'history' as such. When they do refer to it, the sense of history is inextricably linked to the act of telling stories and the act of remembering. To take just one example, *Beowulf* 2105-17 describes the telling of old tales and remembering of ancient deeds: Hrothgar (*gomela Scylding*) remembered many things (*worn gemunde*), he had heard many things from long ago narrated (*fela fricgende feorran rehte*) — this is precisely history being recalled and narrated. Even if the retelling of the events is a pleasant occasion in itself (*andlangne dæg niode naman* [throughout the day (they) took pleasure]), it is no mere diversion: the narrative/song (*gyd*) has to be true and tragic (*soð and sarlic*), and even strange tales (*sylllic spell*) are related correctly (*rehte æfter rihte*).

This conceptualization of history is in fact close to that shared by historians of antiquity, such as Herodotus, Thucydides, and Sallust: for them, history was only what one had seen and could recall.<sup>71</sup> This is, after all, Hrothgar's personal history, and in this cultural frame (that of the society in *Beowulf*, not necessarily that of the society that read or listened to *Beowulf*), this is the main way in which history could be *soð*, though perhaps not the only way, since *scops* can also narrate truthful (hi)stories, but their authority comes from a validation by means of memory and

69 Bately, ed., *The Old English Orosius*, 1.5 (p. 23).

70 Opland, *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry*, 239.

71 Croke and Emmett, "Historiography."



poetic skill; thus, they can narrate true things about events they did not witness.<sup>72</sup> This seems to be a commonly held belief in oral vernacular memorial traditions: the audiences expected the ‘truth’ from their poet-historians. In the case of Old Norse literature, for instance, audiences seemed to think that saga authors could rehearse true events from the Saga Age, because they assumed that the story had been handed down in an unbroken line of transmission from the time of the events and, thus, tradition was maintained as a reservoir of truth.<sup>73</sup> In *Beowulf*, this is marked by the often repeated phrase *we gefrunon* ‘we have heard tell, we have learned by asking,’ which places the poem in an ancient and thus authoritative context — we have heard it from people who had heard it in their turn, and therefore it must be true. In this case, the underlying conceptualization of history is something one can hear and which is validated by its having been heard, just like in the case of *sægen* and the *cwide* compounds which are evidently still rooted conceptually in the oral memorial tradition, even when they are embedded in prose contexts which clearly refer to written history. This is yet another example of the strong conceptual ties across genres and cultural codes permeating Anglo-Saxon thinking about history.

Another event schema prevalent in verse is that of ‘recounting one’s genealogy.’ In fact, genealogy, as personal (but also involving ethnic and political) history, is one of the privileged cultural patterns by which even distant history can be accessed throughout the Anglo-Saxon cultural world. *Beowulf* is full of genealogies, and they can sometimes even be taken as a by-word for history. Thus, when Beowulf arrives on the Danish shore, he is asked to recount his lineage (*frumcyn*) before making any move: “Nu ic eower sceal / frumcyn witan ær ge fyr heonan” (*Beowulf* 251-52), and Beowulf replies by narrating his personal history, that is, his ethnic ties and lineage. Beowulf is welcomed when it is made known that the leader of the East-Danes knows his noble descent: “Eow het secgan [. . .] / aldor East-Dena, þæt he eower æþelu can” (*Beowulf* 391-92), which is a way of saying that he knows and acknowledges the hero’s history.

Yet even in the sphere of more official, politically significant historical narrative, genealogy is paramount to Anglo-Saxon elite culture. In this case, the event schema of genealogy performance is connected to the role schema of the poet-historian. For *scops* also played a much more immediately political role than being mere entertainers: they legitimized royal power. Before the ecclesiastical monopoly on learning, the

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72 For authority in Anglo-Saxon oral contexts, see Bredehoft, *Authors*, 7-14.

73 Andersson, “From Tradition to Literature,” 9.

*scops* would have been the ones composing and performing the early royal genealogies, thereby effectively legitimizing kings — they were “the link between the king and his divine source of power,” acting as chroniclers and historians, and also as mediators between the ruler and the ruled.<sup>74</sup> Thus, the *scop* acted as both the preserver and reenactor of history. This dialectic of recording the past and performing it is seen at work in the episode previously analysed (*Beowulf* 867-76), where Hrothgar’s *scop* recounts the events that had just happened, praising Beowulf’s slaying of Grendel. Here, history is being composed on the spot, and immediately reenacted. Truthfulness is still a requisite — the *scop* is not fictionalizing but ordering events in a narrative form acceptable within this type of literary tradition. In prose and glosses, ‘genealogy’ (*cynnrecennis*) is used to translate the generic *historia*, as previously seen, which shows the persistence, in the minds of the glossators, of the conceptual schema that genealogy is history.<sup>75</sup>

The act of recollection is laden with nostalgia: as Hrothgar begins to recount his personal history, his heart wells up inside him (*hred̥er inne weoll*, 2114), as he mourns his youth (*gioguðe cwiðan*, 2113). Certainly, nostalgia is deeply embedded in Anglo-Saxon conceptualizations of history.<sup>76</sup> In cognitive terms, this is an emotion schema. Theoretically, these types of conceptualizations are collective and cognitive since groups of people link these emotions to the situations in which they occur, thus creating a schema whereby the emotion will always be related to the situation, even if they do not occur in conjunction. Hence, the event schema ‘oral recitation’ can be connected to emotion schemas of ‘nostalgia,’ but also ‘merriment, collective enjoyment (the *dream* of Heorot).’ In *Beowulf*, nostalgia mediates between a longing for communion with ancient heroes and the recognition that their antiquity sets them apart; hence, it comes from the fact that the past is seen as something that is simultaneously separate from and embodied in the present.<sup>77</sup> Nostalgia as an emotion embedded in history and memory is also present in some of the Exeter Book elegies, especially in *The Wanderer* and *The Ruin*: “Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago? Hwær cwom mappumgyfa?” (Where is the horse gone? Where the rider? Where the

74 Opland, *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry*, 265.

75 For the importance of royal genealogies (and their constructed, largely fictional nature) even in late Anglo-Saxon England, see Dumville, “Kingship,” 89-97. For the connection of oral tradition to textual genealogical lists, see Moisl, “Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies,” 220-34.

76 Trilling, *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia*, 4-14.

77 Trilling, *The Aesthetics of Nostalgia*, 12.

giver of treasure?).<sup>78</sup> Here, the Wanderer's complaint is more than a personal lamentation: he commemorates all the archetypal figures of heroic oral tradition, mourning not only their physical passing but also perhaps their waning as literary figures, as the memorial tradition they are part of is slowly being forgotten and replaced. In the same text (*The Wanderer* 74-78), but more so in *The Ruin*, nostalgia is combined with awe at the remains of a past that is not Anglo-Saxon (the Roman ruins) but which the literary tradition adopts through a shared attitude towards the past combining admiration, wonder, and sadness.

These examples indicate a convergence of mental patterns and, ultimately, a coherent and unitary set of conceptualizations that, despite the heterogeneity of the forms in which Anglo-Saxons expressed the notion of history, remains roughly the same across the 'great divide' between orality and literacy, folk and elite, verse and prose. The cultural worlds of Bede and *Beowulf* are thus separated only by different ways of encoding their experience of the world. The ways of thinking about history and narrative are mostly the same: history narrates old events (*ealdspræc*) and it must be truthful (*sop*); although history is a narrative (*spell*), sometimes even a poetical account, recited by an oral poet (*scop*), the very fact that it belongs to a memorial tradition (*gemund*) and was handed down orally (*we gefrunon*), as 'sayings' (*spræc*), guarantees its truthfulness; the sequence of events is preserved, as far as possible, for history is a reckoning (*reccennys*) and an ordering (*getæl*) of events in the fictional matrix of the historians, be they *scops* or *eald-/cranicwritera*; genealogies are powerful ways of ordering the past and shaping identities — they are personal histories, but they become relevant for entire communities when kings want to legitimize their rule by having a *scop* or a *cranicwritere* compile their *cynreccennys*.

But what is the locus of mentality expression? Is it the very text which contains the specific history-word? Is it its pre-textual history of usage? In other words, do these words uncover pre-existing mentalities, or are they created to give shape to new conceptualizations? Both cases may be true, and there may even be occasional overlap: a scribe/author might have used a word he (or she) had heard to express a new meaning that is akin to and yet different from the original meaning of the word. In such a scenario, *gewyrd* may have had the mundane meaning of 'event' in current spoken Old English, but a glossator may have used it to channel connotations from the semantic sphere of *wyrd* as 'fate/will-of-God.'

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78 *The Wanderer*, 92, in Klinck, ed., *The Old English Elegies*, 75-78.

If the locus of mentality is the community, however small, what are the types of communities which might have shared these word-embodied conceptualizations? Textual communities could be comprised of both literate readers of texts and illiterate hearers of texts read or performed aloud, but oral communities could of course encompass the literate as well.<sup>79</sup> Even Bede was familiar with traditional verse (he even appears as an oral performer in his *Death Song*, according to Cuthbert's account) and was part of a lively oral community conversant with folk stories.<sup>80</sup> Thus, some of these communities of text and thought may have been as broad as encompassing all the speakers of late West Saxon Old English (in the case of *spell*), while others could have been as limited to the literati of a small monastic community (*cranic*). The former would have been used in most social and cultural milieus, instantiated in various schematic (but also categorical) representations; the latter would have been based on taxonomical conceptualizations (*cranic* is a type of *historia*). Yet these are extreme cases. Most mentalities and communities must have been halfway between. Some schemas would have been reshaped and adapted to Christian ecclesiastical or monastic contexts, as in Bede's reshaping of the role schema of *scop* and the event schema of oral recitation in the Cædmon episode, turning a secular diversion belonging to folk oral tradition into a religious literate genre.

On the other hand, certain secular aristocratic circles (or even ecclesiastical ones, as Alcuin's Ingeld reprimand seems to indicate) would have enjoyed vernacular epic verse and adopted it into elite literary culture. In such a narrative (*Beowulf* could be seen as one), the schema of oral recitation is reshaped and becomes culturally relevant again, albeit as a literary fiction. In terms of conceptualizations, this marks a transition from schema to category, as oral recitation might have been a long-gone tradition for these communities, and thus not a schema in any original sense. Educated in an environment of clerical learning, they would not have had first-hand experience of actual oral delivery of verse. Their use of oral verse was itself a literary fiction, confined to the written text inscribed on parchment. This is what the *Beowulf* poet might have been trying to preserve, and to revive: the forms of history and memory which commemorated and constructed the heroic past, which was "slipping into oblivion, disconnected from the world of written texts and Christian learning, its very memory in danger of being lost."<sup>81</sup>

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79 Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*, 3-10, 30-87.

80 Bredehoft, *Authors*, 20-24. McNamara, "Bede's Role," 61-69.

81 Liuzza, "Beowulf: Monuments," 101.

For these reasons, Bede's and *Beowulf*'s are not two separate worlds, even in their apparently different ways of understanding history and the past. Instead, they should be seen as two cultural models (occupying regions of a wider spectrum) which are based on the same set of ideas about history, differing not in their essence but only in their mode of conceptualization.

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