Conceptualizing the Life Course in Early Medieval England

Thijs Porck and Harriet Soper

According to pseudo-Ingulf's *Historia Croylandensis*, the tenth-century Abbot Turketyl divided the monks of Crowland Abbey into four groups according to their years spent in the monastery. From their moment of entry until their twenty-fourth year, monks belonged to the "juniores." This group was tasked with performing duties diligently, including singing, reading and serving more senior members; these monks were also warned against overbearing pride and disrespect towards elders. The next group, having spent twenty-five to forty years in the monastery, were the "medium gradum" [middle rank] and, while they were released from minor duties, they were still expected to perform other tasks, especially managerial ones. The third rank consisted of "seniores," who had spent forty to fifty years in the monastery; these monks were exempt from almost all choir duties and, if they had reached their forty-second year, were excused from all outdoor tasks. Turketyl's rules further stipulated that this group was to lack in nothing, since they had sacrificed so much in the service of God. Still older monks, those who had spent over fifty years in the monastery, were called "Sempectae" and assigned a special room in the infirmary as well as a personal assistant. The "Sempectae" could do whatever they liked, inside or outside the monastery, "cum frocco vel sine frocco" [either in his frock or without it]. This oldest group of monks was to be treated with the utmost respect: "nullus eum in aliquo audeat offendere sed summa pace, animique quiete finem suum praestoletur" [no person shall presume in any way to offend him, but with the greatest peace and tranquility of mind he shall await his end].¹ While purporting to be the work of the eleventh-century Abbot Ingulf of Crowland, the *Historia Croylandensis* is very likely a fifteenth-century forgery and it is doubtful, therefore, whether the chronicle's description of Turketyl's

¹ Pseudo-Ingulf, *Historia Croylandensis*, ed. Walter de Gray Birch, *The Chronicle of Croyland Abbey by Ingulph* (Wisbech, 1883), 82–84, trans. Henry T. Riley, *Ingulph's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland with the Continuations by Peter of Blois and Anonymous Writers* (London, 1854), 97–100.

arrangements reflects actual tenth-century practice.² Nonetheless, this passage raises a set of questions as to how age stratification may have functioned in early medieval England and how, on the basis of one's progression along the life course, one might be considered part of a distinct group distinguished by physical and moral characteristics and charged with particular responsibilities towards a community and members of other age groups.

This volume explores how concepts of the life course, replete with diverse biological, social, and spiritual aspects, influenced the lives, writings and art of the inhabitants of early medieval England. It demonstrates the sheer variety of ideas surrounding human aging in this period, and explores how these ideas may have impacted or even defined a person's legal, religious and social status. A multitude of terms circulated for different phases of life, and the arrangement and associated characteristics of life phases often fluctuated in subtle ways across different sources, genres and contexts of usage. As will be seen, exegetical accounts of the 'ages of man' tend to foreground the profound spiritual and cosmic significance attached to certain numbers and sets, while texts more closely concerned with the daily life of monasteries often opt to connect reflections on the life course with processes of learning and teaching. Medical texts frequently draw out divisions between normative and non-normative bodies in their references to people of different ages. Meanwhile, in poetic contexts, narratives of individual human aging at times shade indistinctly into the life narratives of wider communities. In material contexts, the life courses of things often differ strikingly from human experience – objects are repaired, recycled and maintained in ways which allow them to far exceed the human lifespan. For all this variety, diverse texts and artefacts all invoke or implicate characterizations of life courses, from homilies and vernacular poetry to manuscript illustrations and the Bayeux Tapestry.

With the exception of some archaeological studies,³ most previous scholarly investigations in this area have focused on a single phase or aspect of the human life course, striving often to elucidate the experience of previously 'mute groups', such as children or the elderly.⁴ Notable examples include Sally

2 See, e.g., David Roffe, "The *Historia Croylandensis*: A Plea for Reassessment," *English Historical Review* 110 (1995): 93–108, who notes that the *Historia Croylandensis* makes use of some original pre-Conquest documents.

3 Two notable examples include Nick Stoodley, "From the Cradle to the Grave: Age Organization and the Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Rite," *World Archaeology* 31 (2000): 456–72; Sally Crawford, "Overview: The Body and Life Course," in *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, ed. David A. Hinton, Sally Crawford, and Helena Hamerow (Oxford, 2011), 625–40.

4 On 'mute groups', see Crawford, "Body and Life Course," 627–31.

Crawford's *Childhood in Anglo-Saxon England* (Stroud, 1999), Susan Irvine and Winfried Rudolf's edited volume *Childhood and Adolescence in Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture* (Toronto, 2018), and Thijs Porck's *Old Age in Early Medieval England: A Cultural History* (Woodbridge, 2019). The present volume builds on these studies in contesting that it is especially productive to try to understand how early medieval English life stages relate to, or are defined against, each other, while keeping the whole continuum of the life course in view. Furthermore, given the many complex ways in which norms of life development are articulated in this period, investigation of these sources benefits from a comparative approach not only across different life stages, but across different kinds of source material. Therefore, the contributions to this volume both consider how different life stages may be connected with each other, and move across the many different traditions involved, aiming to show maximal sensitivity to different genres, practices and cultural contexts. With its specific focus on the nature of early medieval English texts and contexts, this volume aims to develop the insights of previous scholarly enterprises working with a broader temporal focus, such as J. A. Burrow's *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford, 1986), as well as wide-ranging surveys of medieval Europe, such as Isabelle Cochelin and Karen Smyth's *Medieval Life Cycles: Continuity and Change* (Turnhout, 2013) and Shannon Lewis-Simpson's *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden, 2008).

Although the passage of life might profitably be termed *life cycle* or *lifespan*, among many other labels, the phrase *life course* is preferred here, as it avoids the biological and recursive connotations of *life cycle*,⁵ as well as the firmly quantitative resonance of *lifespan*. The term *life course* is well established in adjacent fields of enquiry, developed initially within sociology but now playing a key role in archaeological studies of the medieval period.⁶ The label shares with *life cycle* the denotation of “[t]he course of human existence from birth, through childhood and maturity, to old age and death; spec. one that is characteristic of a particular culture,” as well as signifying, beyond the realm of the human, “a course or evolution from a beginning, through development and productivity, to decay or ending.”⁷ The phrase *life course* is furthermore appropriate in signaling a linear progression to some degree, but with the

5 OED, s.v. *life cycle*, 1.a., “The sequence of stages through which an individual organism passes from origin as a zygote to death, or through which the members of a species pass from the production of gametes by one generation to that by the next.”

6 On the background of the term *life course* see Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (Woodbridge, 2012), 1–6. With reference to the early medieval period, see Crawford, “Body and Life Course,” 627–28.

7 OED, s.v. *life cycle*, 1.b, 2.

liquid connotations of *course* simultaneously allowing for a multitude of currents moving at once,⁸ which reflects what we find in early medieval traditions concerned with human and non-human aging. The contributions to this volume thus each consider different manifestations of issues pertaining to human aging across the literature, culture and thought of early medieval England, examining diverse literary, linguistic, medical, and material traditions.

1 Defining and Dividing the Life Course

τί ἐστὶν ὃ μίαν ἔχον φωνὴν τετράπους καὶ δίπους καὶ τρίπους γίνεται;

What is that which has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?⁹

The ‘Riddle of the Sphinx’ and its answer (a human who, as an infant, crawls on all fours; as an adult, walks on two legs; and, as an elderly person, walks with a cane) is one well-known example of the life course conceptualized as falling into different phases. From Antiquity, through the medieval period, and indeed up until the present day, divisions of life into stages ranging from three to twelve can be found across a variety of textual and visual sources.¹⁰ These schematizations provide options for understanding the shape of the human lifespan as a whole, and for framing various phases of life in relation—or contradistinction—to each other. Each phase may be presented as imbued with a

8 OED, s.v. *course*, II.11.a, “the path taken by a [...] flowing stream.”

9 Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 3.5.8, ed. and trans. James G. Frazer, *The Library, Volume I: Books 1–3.9*, Loeb Classical Library 121 (Cambridge, MA, 1921), 346–47.

10 For a wide-ranging study of the division of the life course, see Franz Boll, “Die Lebensalter. Ein Beitrag zur antiken Ethologie und zur Geschichte der Zahlen,” in *Kleine Schriften zur Sternkunde des Altertums*, ed. Viktor Stegemann (Leipzig, 1950), 156–225. For the medieval period in particular, see Burrow, *Ages of Man*; Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton, 1986); Mary Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man's Life* (Cambridge, 1986); Michael Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age: The Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought, 1250–1350* (Lanham, 1989); Monica Chojnacka and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, eds., *Ages of Woman, Ages of Man: Sources in European Social History, 1400–1750* (London, 2002); Cochelin and Smyth, *Medieval Life Cycles*. For twentieth-century representations, see for example Ithell Colquhoun, *Ages of Man*, 1944, oil on panel, 11½ × 7” (29.4 × 18.2cm), Tate, London; Henry Moore, *Seven Ages of Man*, 1982, lithograph on paper, various dimensions, Tate, London; and Richard Kindersley, *The Seven Ages of Man*, 1980, an aluminum sculpture situated on Queen Victoria Street, London. The latter two of these works draw overtly on Jaques’ account of the seven ages in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*.

set of characteristics, thus forming stages of biological, intellectual and moral development, and carrying a complex range of connotations. The essays in this section of the volume address such issues of schematization, terminology, association and connotation in the context of early medieval England.

Thijs Porck's contribution is a natural starting point for the volume as a whole, since it provides an overview of the extant schematizations of the human life course, as found in the cultural record of early medieval England. He covers how homilies, encyclopedic works and visual artworks from this period featured various schemes, ranging from three to six 'ages of man'. His overview suggests a fairly uniform tradition of life course schematization in early medieval England, a conclusion that is partially in line with what Isabelle Cochelin had claimed for early medieval Europe as a whole.¹¹ Porck next discusses an intriguing diagram in Cambridge, Gonville and Caius College, MS 428/428, which uniquely visualizes four stages of life as four women. While this diagram has been ascribed to the early eleventh-century monk Byrhtferth of Ramsey, this first comprehensive analysis of the diagram within its manuscript context reveals that this attribution is unlikely. Rather, the diagram and its accompanying text seem to stem from a time when alternative ideas were introduced into the discourse on the human life course during the twelfth century; as such they represent a shift away from the tradition of life course schematizations in pre-Conquest England.

Next, Daria Izdebska examines the words that denote the individual stages of human life in Old English. This lexical-semantic analysis of Old English age vocabulary brings to light not only how many stages were distinguished in lexical terms, but also focuses on how these words interact with matters of class, status and gender roles. For instance, Izdebska notes how there is a much larger set of lexical items associated with men than with women, as there are with youth and maturity when compared to old age. Her analysis also illuminates the various connotations of terms denoting youth and old age, ingrained in the vocabulary of early medieval England: Old English words like *frod* 'old and wise' and *cniht* 'boy, servant' reveal how some concepts overlapped. Through a comparison with modern-day notions of the life course, Izdebska is able to elucidate the distinctive nature of early medieval English age vocabulary.

Darren Barber's chapter shifts our attention from Old English age vocabulary to the Latin terms that were used to refer to individual stages of life. Traditionally, scholars have viewed these Latinate terms as notoriously slippery, with the onset of old age (*senectus*), for instance, starting at anywhere

11 Isabelle Cochelin, "Introduction: Pre-Thirteenth-Century Definitions of the Life Cycle," in Cochelin and Smyth, *Medieval Life Cycles*, 1–54.

between 35 and 72 years of age.¹² Barber challenges this notion of authorial imprecision by showcasing how precisely Alcuin of York used the terms *infantia*, *pueritia*, *adolescentia*, and *iuventus*. For Alcuin, these terms did not only refer to very specific age ranges, he also ascribed to these stages distinct moral characteristics and prescribed particular forms of education for each. Barber showcases how, in Alcuin's writing, these four *gradus aetatis* represent a set pattern of probationary and confirmatory steps toward mental and spiritual maturation.

Together, these three chapters provide the foundation for further contributions to this volume, which together consider how the stages of life denoted by these Old English and Latin terms were approached and elaborated in various discourses, ranging from medical traditions, exegesis and homilies to Old English poetry.

2 The Life Course and the Human Body

Qui iacet in lecto, quondam certabat in arvis
 Cum cervis, quoniam fessa senectus adest.
 Qui olim strato laetus recubabat in ostro,
 Vix panno veteri frigida membra tegit.
 Longa dies oculos atra caligine claudit,
 Solivagos athomos qui numerare solent.
 Dexterâ, quae gladios, quae fortia tela vibrabat,
 Nunc tremit atque ori porrigit aegre cibos.
 Clarior ecce tuba subito vox faucibus haesit,
 Auribus adpositis murmura clausa ciet.

He who once hunted in the fields for the stag
 lies in bed, now that weary old age is at hand.
 He who once reclined joyously on his purple couch
 can scarcely cover his chill limbs with an old rag.
 The long day closes in black darkness eyes
 which used to count each solitary wandering mote.
 Hands which once brandished swords and mighty weapons
 now tremble and can barely convey their food to their mouths.

12 Shulamith Shahar, "Who Were Old in the Middle Ages?," *Social History of Medicine* 6 (1993): 319.

Voices, clearer than trumpets, suddenly stick in the throat summoning up a subdued whisper for attentive listeners.¹³

Aging is in large part a biological process, characterized by physical changes in the body. It is common in present-day medical practices to distinguish between various stages of life and develop treatments aimed at particular age groups. Within the societies of early medieval England, archaeologists have been able to highlight the physical experiences of people in various stages of life,¹⁴ but textual allusions to physical characteristics of the aging process remain relatively understudied. Early medieval English writers were nonetheless well aware of how time brings about changes in the human body, and how such changes might be stratified into multiple distinct phases. A notable example is the Old English description of the development of the fetus, which distinguishes between ten separate monthly stages, each marked by physical changes in the body of the fetus.¹⁵ Observations of the physical characteristics of the aging process are not limited to the medical corpus, however. Homilists and exegetes drew on physical characteristics associated with youth and old age to interpret passages of the Bible and reveal divine plans for humankind;¹⁶ poets, too, drew on concepts of distinct life stages.¹⁷ The contributions to

- 13 Alcuin, *De rerum humanarum vicissitudine et clade Lindisfarnensis monasterii*, lines 101–10, ed. and trans. Peter Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance* (London, 1985), 130–33.
- 14 See particularly Nick Stoodley, “Childhood to Old Age,” in Hinton, Crawford, and Hamerow, *Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, 641–66.
- 15 László Sándor Chaddonnens, “A New Edition of the Old English ‘Formation of the Foetus,’” *Notes and Queries*, n.s. 47 (2000): 10–11.
- 16 For the role of physical characteristics of old age in Old English homilies, see, e.g., Thijs Porck, “Gerontophobia in Early Medieval England: Anglo-Saxon Reflections on Old Age,” in *Sense and Feeling in Daily Living in the Early Medieval English World*, ed. Maren Clegg Hyer and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Liverpool, 2020), 219–35, 278–82.
- 17 For a summary of previous scholarship, see Harriet Soper, *The Life Course in Old English Poetry* (forthcoming). J. R. R. Tolkien famously perceived the structure of *Beowulf* as a contrast between youth and old age, in “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics,” in *Interpretations of Beowulf: A Critical Anthology*, ed. R. D. Fulk (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1991), 33, 35. More recent studies include Thomas D. Hill, “The Age of Man and the World in the Old English *Guthlac A*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 80 (1981): 13–21; Burrow, *Ages of Man*; Jordi Sánchez-Martí, “Age Matters in Old English Literature,” in Lewis-Simpson, *Youth and Age*, 205–25; Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England*, particularly 177–211; Harriet Soper, “Reading the Exeter Book Riddles as Life-Writing,” *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 68 (2017): 841–65; Shu-han Luo, “Tender Beginnings in the Exeter Book Riddles,” and Stacy S. Klein, “Parenting and Childhood in *The Fortunes of Men*,” both in Irvine and Rudolf, *Childhood and Adolescence*, 71–94, 95–119.

this section of the volume address the role of the life course in medicine and also look at how two physically transformative stages of life (pregnancy and puberty) were addressed in various textual traditions, ranging from charms to homiletic texts.

Jackie Fay's chapter looks at the role that age plays in the Old English medical corpus, consisting of the Old English *Herbarium*, the *Leechbooks* and the *Lacnunga*. She finds that age-related terms, as well as references to the gender of the patient, are relatively rare in these texts, suggesting that the normative body assumed by most remedies is a man who is neither a child nor an elderly person. Age-specific remedies that do occur in the corpus give an impression as to what physical conditions were assumed most common for children (teething problems, growing pains and epilepsy) and the elderly (visual disorders, digestive problems). Interestingly, some remedies prescribe the use of (parts of) a child's body as part of a cure, notably for those problems associated with old age: child's urine is a cure for poor eyesight and sleeping next to a *fæt* ('fat') child can alleviate stomach-ache. As such, while the young body may have been peripheral and nonnormative in a pre-Conquest medical context, it was also a powerful source of healing.

Also discussing the Old English medical tradition, Caroline Batten focuses on a number of charms and remedies dealing with miscarriage, stillbirth and prolonged labor. Batten argues that these obstetric texts shed a unique and revealing light on a separate stage in women's life courses: the pregnancy stage, marked by danger and marginality, as well as proximity to death. These early medieval English remedies portray the pregnant female body as liminal, problematic and contaminated. Batten, like Fay, detects the strong presence of a gender bias in the Old English medical corpus, which considers the body of an adult man to be the norm.

The contribution by Elaine Flowers considers another stage of life defined by a physical change in the body: puberty. Focusing on religious texts, including homilies, penitentials and monastic rules, Flowers demonstrates how puberty was generally portrayed in terms of bodily and cognitive growth, while, at the same time, churchmen expressed a concern over puberty's connection to sin. With the onset of puberty came a new susceptibility to sexual desire: monastic rules warned against the potential consequences of uncontrolled pubescent bodies, and adolescent saints, by way of example, chose lives of chastity when puberty set in. Like Fay and Batten, Flowers notes a gender bias in the treatment of the aging body, as the religious writings from early medieval England seem disproportionally weighted towards the experiences of men over women.

Each of the contributions to this section of the volume reveal how, in early medieval English writings, physical traits associated with individual stages of

the human life course intersected with other cultural frameworks, particularly those of gender, religion and morality. Whether in medical texts or religious discourse, the transitions of the aging body are linked intimately to a wide range of other sociocultural notions.

3 Intergenerational Dynamics

Ful oft þæt gegongeð, mid godes meahtum,
 þætte wer ond wif in woruld cennað
 bearn mid gebyrdum ond mid bleom gyrwað,
 tennaþ ond tætaþ, oþþæt seo tid cymeð,
 gegæð gearrimum, þæt þa geongan leomu,
 liffæstan leoðu, geloden weorþað.
 Fergað swa ond feþað fæder ond modor,
 giefað ond gierwað. God ana wat
 hwæt him weaxendum winter bringað.¹⁸

It very often happens through God's powers, that a man and a woman bring into the world children through births and they clothe them with colors, they tend to and caress them, until the time comes, it goes with the passing of years, that the young limbs, the members fixed with life, become fully grown. Thus father and mother carry and lead them, they give and they provide. God only knows what the winters will bring to them, growing up!

One crucial aspect of studying the life course through history is contemplating how various generations interact or are presented as interacting. Adult parents take care of young children; adult children may need to take care of elderly parents; disabled adults were at times cared for by relatives,¹⁹ including parents and children. Grandmothers could take an interest in the upbringing of their granddaughters,²⁰ while fathers could be concerned over the succession by their sons. Intergenerational dynamics are therefore central to the chapters that make up this section of the volume.

18 *The Fortunes of Men*, lines 1–9, ed. T. A. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge, 1976), 58–63. On this passage as a well-established focal point for the discussion of childhood in Old English texts, see Klein, “Parenting and Childhood,” 95–119.

19 See Christina Lee, “Disability,” in *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Studies*, ed. Jacqueline Stodnick and Renée R. Trilling (Chichester, 2012), 30.

20 See, e.g., Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England*, 224–26.

James Chetwood takes an onomastic perspective on the life course, focusing on name-giving practices. When parents name a child, they symbolically signal the child's membership of a family and its belonging to a wider community. Intergenerational links could be established through the passing down of names (or parts of names) of both living and deceased family members. Chetwood suggests that this practice grew more common in later centuries, as the rite of naming a child became more public and outward-facing. As such, the act of naming a child became increasingly influenced by the aspirations of the parents within the wider social context that they inhabited. Chetwood also describes how, as people grew older, their names could be adapted. Chetwood notes how the adoption of bynames, in particular, can denote various aspects of one's social identity after reaching adulthood, ranging from physical health, occupation, gender and, of course, age. Such recorded names as Burewold Horloc [grey locks] and Adam Witegos [white goose] may, for instance, indicate the advanced age of these two men. These and similar community-created bynames reveal how such personal traits as age could define one's social standing.

The focus of Katherine Cross's contribution lies on another facet of the relationship between parents and child: weaning. Expanding upon archaeological and osteological analyses of infant feeding practices in early medieval England, Cross explores how Anglo-Latin authors used the image of weaning as a potent metaphor for religious education. Cross demonstrates how religious writers came to associate the image of weaning in particular with conversion and, therefore, it is often found in the hagiography of missionary saints such as Willibrord, Boniface and Leoba. The texts Cross discusses present actual weaning as a meaningful transition in the life of a child; as a metaphor for conversion, the process of weaning stands for a gradual introduction to Christianity, aided by motherly love and care.

Amy Faulkner explores another kind of intergenerational dynamic, drawing attention to the close relationship between individual human lifespans and those of wider communities. Focusing on the Old English poems *Genesis A* and *Beowulf*, Faulkner highlights the crucial place of material inheritance and transmission of wealth in poetic depictions of succession and dynastic continuity. The genealogical sections of *Genesis A* foreground a recurring element that is not present in its biblical source: the inheritance of wealth by the successors to a dead patriarch. This element, Faulkner argues, is presented as an important stabilizing factor in the succession from one generation of rulers to the next. In cases where a legitimate heir is absent and the community's wealth cannot be transferred to the next generation, as in the closing scenes of *Beowulf*, this is a sign of a community's instability and looming collapse.

The three contributions in this section all highlight how intergenerational dynamics, ranging from name-giving practices and weaning to succession, could all be imbued with symbolic significance. More than practicalities, these interactions between members of different age groups were of great cultural importance in early medieval England.

4 Life Beyond the Human

Senescunt quę eterna non sunt.
æghwæt ealdað þæs þe ece ne byð.²¹

Everything which is not eternal grows old.

This Latin-Old English proverb, added to the Royal Psalter by an eleventh-century hand, articulates a very simple idea: humans are not the only ones to become old, to experience decline and “to grow frail or wear out with age, decay, deteriorate.”²² The Old English term *eald* is applied to words, books and ideas, while the natural world, too, is understood as subject to aging, such that it falls into a condition of physical decline in its sixth and last age.²³ The Old English poem *Solomon and Saturn 11*, for instance, explicitly compares the withering effect of passing Time on Nature to the human aging process.²⁴ In the last section of this volume, two contributions continue this train of thought and apply the idea of the life course to, respectively, material artefacts and socioeconomically crucial cereal crops.

21 London, British Library, Royal 2 B.v, fol. 6r.

22 DOE, s.v. *ealdian*, 2.

23 On the semantic range of *eald*, and the many non-human entities it is applied to, see DOE, s.v. *eald*, and Ashley Crandell Amos, “Old English Words for Old,” in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe: Selected Papers from the Annual Conference of the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, Held 25–26 February and 11–12 November 1983*, ed. Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto, 1990), 95–106. For a re-evaluation of Amos’s lexicographical study, see Thijs Porck, “Growing Old among the Anglo-Saxons: The Cultural Conceptualisation of Old Age in Early Medieval England” (unpublished PhD thesis, Leiden University, 2016), 59–72, 239–94. On the world’s sixth age in connection with Old English poetry, see, for instance, G. V. Smithers, “The Meaning of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*,” *Medium Ævum* 26 (1957): 144–53. See also, notably, Christine Fell, “Perceptions of Transience,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2013), 180–97.

24 On this passage, see Thomas D. Hill, “Saturn’s Time Riddle: An Insular Latin Analogue for *Solomon and Saturn 11* lines 282–291,” *Review of English Studies*, n.s. 39 (1988): 273–76; Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England*, 91–93.

Gale Owen-Crocker's chapter demonstrates how examination of the 'life courses' of artefacts, including textiles, metalwork and manuscripts, can be highly revealing of not only the objects themselves, but also of the people who made, used, reused and eventually discarded these objects. She provides object biographies of the Orkney Hood, the Bayeux Tapestry, the Sutton Hoo Bowl and Shield, as well as a number of manuscripts. In doing so, Owen-Crocker showcases the new opportunities for research offered by the latest scientific methods of studying the various stages of life (production, use, repair, destruction, conservation) of such artefacts. At the same time, just as Faulkner has previously demonstrated in her study of inheritance and legacy in poetic contexts, Owen-Crocker contemplates how human lives are so often exceeded by the non-human, as material possessions and crafted objects persist beyond the range of a human lifespan.

This volume's last chapter, by Debby Banham, focuses on the life cycle, rather than the life course, of cereal crops. Using a wide variety of textual and archaeological sources, she outlines the yearly cycle of ploughing, sowing, tilling, reaping, mowing and threshing for grain as well as the process of baking bread and its varied uses. Ultimately, Banham demonstrates the importance of cereal crop production and procession in the structuring of people's working lives throughout the year. On a grander scale, individual and communal experiences of growth are fundamentally underpinned by agricultural growth. These patterns of growth are not straightforwardly linear – many of the texts discussed by Banham highlight cyclical, recursive and incremental modes of conceptualizing human and vegetable development across time.

On one level, the different understandings of the human life course analyzed in this volume are perhaps surprisingly distinct between different texts, genres and contexts: see Alcuin's meticulous approach to Latin age terms, for instance, contrasted with the enigmatic generality of *mann*, 'man', in vernacular medical writings.²⁵ In acknowledging and emphasizing such distinctions, the present volume works within the tradition that Morton W. Bloomfield once characterized as searching out "discontinuities and differences *within* medieval life, culture, ideas, and art as well as *with* our modern period."²⁶ In this vein, the chapters collected here are committed to uncovering the sheer diversity of ideas attached to human aging in this period.

At the same time, conceptual tools and critical terminology that emerge in one area of enquiry are often full of potential in their applicability elsewhere.

25 See below, 90–114; 60, 61, 81, 89, 145–46.

26 Morton W. Bloomfield, "Continuities and Discontinuities," *New Literary History* 10 (1979): 409.

Owen-Crocker's concept of the 'butterfly moment' of artefacts, through which they may enjoy only "a brief time in the limelight of the occasion for which they were prepared," may, for instance, usefully be extended into frameworks attached to the progression of human lives, including in linguistic and literary contexts.²⁷ There is a sense in which the creation of a byname, as explored by Chetwood, forms another kind of 'butterfly moment', as a point when a person's identity is particularly sharply perceived in terms of its significance to the wider community. The death of a martyred saint may equally be viewed from this lens,²⁸ or the perfection of the resurrected human form of the righteous, like the revived patriarchs in the Old English poem *Andreas*, taking up "geogodhade" [youthhood] and coming forward "edniwinga andweard" [anew, present].²⁹ The concept of the life course does not begin and end with the 'ages of man'; at times, it can take on an unbalanced shape, such that attention is clustered at a single phase or moment of particular relevance to any given context or system of values.

Jo Appleby also traces the ways in which a multidisciplinary approach to the life course may be beneficial. In her Afterword, she considers the implications of the papers in this volume for osteoarchaeological and archaeological studies of age and aging. She demonstrates how various chapters offer cautionary tales for the archaeologist who approaches age as a series of categories, without adequately considering its contextual and complex nature. In addition, Appleby notes how using concepts which are active in early medieval understandings of the life course may offer productive new ways of approaching the stages of human life for osteoarchaeologists and archaeologists.

Ultimately, as the contributions to this volume show, early medieval English perceptions of the life course reflect and inform an expansive range of social, religious, physiological and literary issues. These dynamics come into focus with a new intensity when the life course is approached comparatively and holistically: when life stages are considered against one another, and when diverse sources are placed adjacently, offering sometimes synchronous, sometimes incongruous, views on their theme. Effective study of such concepts thus requires sensitivity to the nuances of generic context, linguistic distinctions

27 See below, 255–56, 267.

28 See, for instance, Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 2015), 79–80, on the "miracle of pain" when martyrs are tortured and killed: "the original death of the martyr [...] was vibrant with the miraculous suppression of suffering. Memories of it set up an imaginative vortex in the minds of those who thronged to the shrine."

29 *Andreas*, lines 782b–83, ed. Richard North and Michael D. J. Bintley, *Andreas: An Edition* (Liverpool, 2018).

and historical contingency; it is only then that more sweeping conclusions about the contours of the early medieval English life course can be reached. We hope that the contributions to this volume reveal something of the fundamental importance of understandings of the life course in underpinning the value systems and discursive frameworks of early medieval England.