SOURCES

The purpose of this part of the website is to give you rapid access to a selection of written sources for early medieval Europe which are often discussed by scholars, and which are also eminently worth your while getting to know. I have given some guidance as to what you might expect to get out of each of them, and I have also supplied references to printed and on-line English translations. The latter are almost always inferior to the former, but they do at least offer rapid access.

Texts in addition to those noted here can be found by browsing:

*The Online Classical and Medieval Library* at [http://omacl.org/](http://omacl.org/)

*Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, at [http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook2.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook2.html)

**ALCUIN (C.735-804), LETTERS**

The leading scholar of the church of York until, probably in 781 or 782, he moved to the court of the Frankish ruler Charlemagne at Aachen (Germany), where he taught and wrote, until becoming abbot of Saint-Martin at Tours (France) from 794 until his death in 804. He was closely involved with Charlemagne, with whom he corresponded extensively, and also in the same way with the kings of Northumbria. He was the author of books on the liberal arts of dialectic and rhetoric, a history of the church of York in verse, and a rebuttal of the heresy of Adoptionism. His letters are particularly important because he corresponded at a very high level, including with rulers, in Northumbria and on the Continent.


**Ammianus Marcellinus, History (Res Gestae)**

Ammianus Marcellinus lived in the second half of the fourth century, and held military office, notably in the Persian campaigns of the 350s and the Emperor Julian's expedition of 363. *History* covered the period from 96 to 378 in thirty-one books, of which the first the first thirteen are lost. The surviving books deal with the period from 353 to 378 in considerable detail. As a contemporary and one closely involved in events, Ammianus is a writer of considerable significance. His text is important for the light it casts on Roman military tactics, on the society and organisation of the barbarians, and on the attitudes of a pagan (which is what Ammianus was) in the fourth century.


**ANEIRIN, THE GODODDIN**

According to Nennius, *History of the Britons*, Aneirin was a British poet active in what appears to the period around 600. An epic poem, *The Gododdin*, consisting of a series of elegies for British warriors killed fighting against the Deirans (probably the southern Northumbrians) at the Battle of *Catraeth* (perhaps Catterick, North Yorkshire) is extant in a thirteenth-century manuscript called 'The Book of Aneirin'. A rubric attributes it to Aneirin. Its importance is less for its factual content
than for the war-band ethos which permeates it, and its underlying assumption of hostility between British and English.


**ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE**

Although based in part on a common stock which was probably put together at the court of King Alfred of Wessex, and agreeing closely for the periods 814–900 and 968–1918, the various versions of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle were compiled in different centres, drew on different materials, and differ considerably in the information they give, so that they may be better regarded as separate chronicles. The A version, which is the most ancient, is the closest to what was compiled at King Alfred’s court and is therefore a very important source. The C, D, E, F, and H versions were continued at different monasteries on the basis of the common stock. The D and E versions, for example, were largely compiled in Northumbria and are important sources for that area. In the printed translations, you can see these versions laid out in parallel to each other, although the on-line version produces, rather unsatisfactorily, a joining-together of all the versions. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a varied and rich source for English history into the later eleventh century. Some of the annals are brief, but others much more expansive, with fascinating detail, and in places saga-like narratives (e.g. 757) and even epic poems (e.g. 937).


**ANNALS OF FULDA**

**ANNALS OF ST BERTIN**

A series of annals for 830-82, especially rich for the history for the history of West Frankia. They were written by various authors. From 835, a certain Prudentius compiled them at the court of Louis the Pious, after whose death in 840 they continued to be compiled in the kingdom of his son, Charles the Bald. After the death of Prudentius in 861, the annals were continued by Hincmar, archbishop of Rheims, who was very active in that kingdom. They represent a rich and detailed source, especially for the nature of the Frankish kingdom and for the Viking attacks on it.


**ASSER, LIFE OF KING ALFRED**

A Welsh churchman from St David’s (Wales), Asser joined the court of King Alfred the Great and assisted with his scholarly activities, dying in 908 or 909. He claims to have written his *Life* of the king in 893. Although it drew extensively on the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, it contains additional information, of which Asser claimed to have first-hand knowledge, and is particularly important for the light it sheds on the king’s beliefs and attitudes.

Alfred P. Smyth, whose translation is listed here, has suggested that it is a tenth-century forgery, but this has not found much support. The web version listed is of an antiquated translation.
published by J. A. Giles in 1847. The notes and information given in the translation by Keynes and Lapidge are much the best.


**Battle of Maldon**

An Old English poem, written around 1000, describing a battle between Ealdorman Byrhtnoth of Essex and a force of sea-borne Vikings. Byrhtnoth allowed these Vikings to land, engaged in battle with them, and was killed and defeated. The poem describes the prelude to the battle and its course, although the last part is lost because the manuscript containing the only copy of it was burned in a fire in 1731. The poem has been used as evidence for military tactics, but its real importance is in its picture of war-band ethos.


**BEDE, ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH PEOPLE, LIFE OF ST CUTHBERT, HISTORY OF THE ABBOTS OF MONKWEMOUTH AND JARROW, ON THE RECKONING OF TIME, LETTER TO BISHOP ECGBERHT, CUTHBERT (CUTHWINE), LETTER ON THE DEATH OF BEDE**

Born in 672/3 in the area of modern Sunderland (Tyne and Wear), Bede entered the recently founded joint monastery of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow at the age of seven, and there he became first a deacon and then a priest. His scholarly work was primarily devoted to biblical exegesis and compute, but his numerous writings included: two *Lives* of St Cuthbert, the one listed here and another in verse; a history of the abbots of his own monastery; and two works on compute, of which *On the Reckoning of Time* was the most extensive, incorporating a chronicle of world history from the birth of Christ to the time of writing. His *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* was one of his last works, finished initially in 731, although revised in 734, and it is the prime source for early English history. It is instructive to read it alongside the *Letter to Egcbert*, in which Bede explains what he thought was wrong with Northumbria in his own time. Bede died in 735 and his death is described in intimate detail in the letter listed here. Cuthwine's letter on Bede's death is remarkably intimate and intriguing view of the great scholar at the very end of his life.


**Beowulf**

An anonymous epic poem of 3,182 lines in Old English, preserved in only one manuscript of around 1000. Beginning with the early history of the Danish kings, it describes how one of them, Hrothgar, built a great hall called Heorot. This was repeatedly attacked by a monster called Grendel until Beowulf, a great hero from the kingdom of the Geats, fought with him and killed him. A further attack was made by way of revenge by Grendel's grieving mother, but Beowulf pursued her to the bottom of the lake where she lived and killed her too. He then returned to the kingdom of the Geats, where he became king himself in due course, dying in the course of a successful fight against a dragon which was marauding the kingdom.

Although the historical personages, insofar as they are not fictional, belong to the sixth century, the poem must have been written in England after that land's conversion to Christianity, because Christian allusions seem deeply built into it (for example, the account of the minstrel in Heorot singing of the creation of the world). So it must date to somewhere between the mid-seventh century and the date of the manuscript into which it was copied, that is around 1000. Most scholars have opted for a date in the eighth century, because the language is archaic (which militates against a date in, say, the late tenth century) and because the poem refers to the alleged ancestor of the late eighth-century King Offa of Mercia, a Danish ruler also called Offa.

The poem is a world-class piece of literature and eminently worth getting to know. Arguably, it is an important source for royal and aristocratic life-styles in early England, and also for the attitudes and ethos of a society based around the war-band.


**Brevium Exempla**

Drawn up in the early ninth century, this is apparently series of sample surveys of royal and ecclesiastical estates to guide surveyors as they worked. Although some of the estates in question are not named, the detail of the information given, for example about rural buildings, crops, and tools, is considerable. The source is important not only for agriculture but also for the capabilities of Carolingian government.


**BURGHAL HIDAGE**

A document compiled sometime after 914 and listing the burhs in southern England intended for defence against the Vikings. It gives figures for the number of hides of land which were allocated to provide men for manning and maintaining each burh. These were calculated on the basis that each hide provided one man, and that four men were needed for each pole (5.5 yards) of fortification around each burh. The accuracy of the figures has been confirmed with reference to surviving burhs, so that the document is important not only for studying the burhs themselves, but also for casting light on the efficiency and efficacy of royal government.

DOMESDAY BOOK

A great survey of England ordered in 1086 by King William the Conqueror. It takes the form principally of an enquiry into the holders of that land and the value of the land in the time of King Edward the Confessor and in 1066. It covers all England except for Northumberland and Durham and part of Cheshire. It is extremely valuable for the economic state of England, as well as for the impact of the Norman Conquest and the nature of English society, especially peasant society.


EINHARD, LIFE OF CHARLEMAGNE (VITA KAROLI)

A layman educated at the monastery of Fulda (Germany), Einhard was an important figure at the court of Charlemagne, and may have been closely involved in building the palace at Aachen (Germany). In the reign of Charlemagne's successor, Louis the Pious, he retired from court to found two monasteries in the area of Frankfurt-am-Main (Germany). His Life of Charlemagne, which is one of several texts he composed, was written in that period, not earlier than 725/6. It is closely modelled on the lives of pagan Roman emperors by the first-century writer Suetonius, and it draws heavily on the Royal Frankish Annals. It is very worthwhile reading, but it may be that it is a more important source for the ideology of power, and how a ruler should behave, than it is for the details of Charlemagne's reign.


EUSEBIUS, LIFE OF CONSTANTINE

FREDEGAR, CHRONICLE

Once thought to be by more than one author, but now thought to be by a single, Burgundian writer working, possibly in Austrasia, in 658/60, and only attributed to Fredegar in the sixteenth century, this is really a series of chronicles following each other, with a central focus on the Franks, from the creation of the world to the writer's time. A continuation was written in the eighth century, including the accession of Pippin III in 751 and of Charlemagne and his brother Carloman, by Pippin's uncle, Count Childerbrand, and then from 751 by his son Count Nibelung.

Excerpts in Murray, Alexander Callander, trans., 1999. From Roman to Merovingian Gaul: A Reader. Broadview: Letchworth, no. 58 (book IV), no. 79 (II, 4–6, 8–9, III, 2, 9), nos. 86–9 (III, 7, 11, 12, 18, 19, 21, 56, 57–9, 70–2, 93).


GILDAS, ON THE RUIN AND DESTRUCTION OF BRITAIN

A British churchman in the middle of the sixth century, possibly dying in 570, this is Gildas's only surviving work. It seeks to show that the sins of the British brought down on them divine retribution in the shape of the English invasions and ravaging. The chronology of the historical sections of the work is very vague, and sometimes demonstrably wrong; but attempts have often been made to extract from it details of the history of Britain, especially with regard to Gildas's account of the Battle of Mount Badon, which he claims as a victory for the British under the leadership of Ambrosius Aurelianus. His work, which was extensively drawn on by Bede in the early parts of the Ecclesiastical History of the English People, may be chiefly important for the light it casts on hostility between the British and the English.
GREGORY OF TOURS (538-94), HISTORY OF THE FRANKS

Born of a Gallo-Roman senatorial family, he was elected Bishop of Tours, as other members of his family had been, in 573, and he was closely involved in royal politics. His History of the Franks (its contemporary title is Ten Books of History) was begun in 576 and extends from the creation of the world to 591. The sections dealing with the fifth and sixth centuries are far and away the richest, and are both detailed and readable. Gregory’s views were of course his own. He was very pre-occupied with the threat of Arianism in his own time, and he was keen to emphasise the importance of the bishops in the kingdom of the Franks. He was also the author of eight book of miracles of saints.


Hincmar, On the Organisation of the Palace (De ordine palatii)

Hincmar was educated at Saint-Denis (France), and entered the service of Louis the Pious, king of the Franks and emperor, in 834, transferring his service to his successor, Charles the Bald, in 840. He was elected Archbishop of Rheims in 845, and was a very active churchmen in ecclesiastical organisation, religious writing, and political activity. His On the Organisation of the Palace was written in 882 for the instruction of the young Carolingian, Carloman III. The first part is a discourse on the duties of the king. The second, which describes the organisation of the king’s palace, is claimed by Hincmar to have been based on the work of Charlemagne’s cousin, Adalhard, and may really have been so. It is a text of the first importance for understanding royal government in that early period.


IBN FADLAN

An account of an embassy which Ibn Fadlan undertook in 921-2 from the Caliph of Baghdad to the king of the Bulgars who lived along the River Volga. There he met Rus (that is Swedish Vikings) and described their trading practices and also a cremation of one of their leading men which he witnessed. This cremation, which involved a ship, ritual sexual intercourse, and sacrifice of animals and the girl who had been subjected to the intercourse, is described in close, and sometimes stomach-churning, detail. Ibn Fadlan’s report is a prime source for the identification of the Rus as Vikings, for their trade from the Baltic to the Caliphate, and for pagan practices in relation to the archaeology of ship-burials in Scandinavia.


Jonas of Orléans, On the Royal Institution (De institutione regia)

Born in Aquitaine before 780, Jonas became Bishop Orléans in 818 until his death in 843/4. Written around the time of the ecclesiastical Council of Orléans in 829, and closely reflecting its
discussions, this text is addressed to Pippin, king of Aquitaine (814-38), and is intended to guide the king's moral and spiritual life, and his relations with the clergy. It belongs to a genre of texts often called 'mirrors of princes' (specula principum), and it should be compared with Hincmar, On the Organisation of the Palace and Sedulius, On Christian Rulers. It is an important source for understanding the Church's attitude to the position and power of kings.


JORDANES, GOTHIC HISTORY (GETICA)

Active in Constantinople, for a time as an officer of a Gothic officer of the Eastern Roman Empire, he may have died in 552. This text, which claims to be a summary of a lost work by Cassiodorus, recounts the origins of the Goths in Scandinavia and their migration across the Baltic Sea and southwards through Scythia; and continues to the wars with the Huns and the clash between the Goths and the Emperor Valens in 378. In its last part, it concentrates on the Ostrogoths, and is especially concerned to glorify their king, Theodoric. The work is especially important for understanding the origin-myths of peoples, the nature of the Gothic people in particular, and the exercise of kingship in an immediately post-Roman barbarian kingdom.


Life of Gregory the Great

Written by an anonymous monk (or nun) of the monastery of Whitby (Yorkshire), probably in the middle of the eighth century, this is the first biography of Pope Gregory the Great to have been written, and it was influential on subsequent writing. It is an important text for the legends surrounding the pope, for the importance of the papacy in England, and also for aspects of the history of Northumbria, especially in the reign of King Edwin.


LIFE OF GUTHLAC BY FELIX

Guthlac was a scion of the Mercian royal house who began his career marauding and raiding, but underwent a conversion experience and became a monk at Repton (Derbyshire). After two years, he left to be a hermit at Crowland (Cambridgeshire) where he died in 714. His life, by his contemporary Felix, is an important source for the light which the account of his earlier career throws on the ethos of the war-band, for the importance of Egyptian-style eremitic monasticism in England, and for the attitudes to death and the afterlife it reveals, especially in vision which Guthlac has of heaven and hell.


NENNIUS, HISTORY OF THE BRITONS

Nennius was an early ninth-century British (Welsh) scholar, and the History of the Britons, which was composed Wales in 829-30, is assigned to him in one of its versions (there were several different versions). There is no other evidence that Nennius was the author of the work, which is a rather patch-work compilation, dealing with the origins of Britain and Ireland, the campaigns of King Arthur, and the histories of various English kingdoms, especially that of Northumbria for which it is of great importance. Its value lies partly in the details it gives, although its factual reliability is very questionable, but above all in the light it casts on the attitudes and traditions of the British in the ninth century, and on the hostility between them and the English.

Notitia Dignitatum

The only surviving copy of the surveys of the Roman military forces in the provinces of the empire, drawn up by an official known as the primicerius notariorum. It dates from after 395, since it shows the empire divided into its western and eastern parts, and it is clear that it is the copy held by the primicerius notariorum for the western part.


Notker the Stammer, of St Gall, Life of Charlemagne (Gesta Karoli)

A monk of St Gall, Notker wrote during the 880s a series of renowned works, notably hymns and musical compositions, and a Life of the patron saint of his monastery, but also his Life of Charlemagne. This is quite different from that of Einhard in that it consists principally of a series of anecdotes about Charlemagne, supposedly derived from oral tradition.


OATHS OF STRASBOURG

The oaths were sworn between Louis the Pious's sons, Charles the Bald and Louis the German, and their followers, at Strasbourg in 842, that is in the course of the civil wars which finished at the Treaty of Verdun in 843. Preserved by Nithard, they are important both for the importance of oath-swearing in the exercise of power, but also because they are amongst the earliest texts in Continental Germanic (which Louis the German and his followers used) and Old French (which Charles the Bald and his followers used).


Paul the Deacon, History of the Lombards

Born in Italy around 720-30, Paul studied at Pavia (Italy) and became tutor to the king of the Lombards' daughter. He later became a monk of Monte Cassino (Italy). After the Frankish ruler Charlemagne destroyed the kingdom of the Lombards, Paul spent time at his court in Francia, returning to Italy in 785 or 787, where he wrote the History of the Lombards, which is the principal source for the history of that people.


ROYAL FRANKISH ANNALS
A set of annals extending from 741 to 829, and probably written at the court of the Frankish ruler, Charlemagne, in the late eighth century, from when the annals constitute a contemporary record, even if one influenced by the political considerations of their authors. A revised version was produced in the early ninth century and this exists alongside the original annals; it is notable for including more information on disasters, notably on the defeat of Charlemagne's army at Roncesvalles in the Pyrenees in 778. After 829, a western Frankish version of the annals was continued as the Annals of St Bertin, and an east Frankish version as the Annals of Fulda.


**RULE OF ST BENEDICT**

This rule for the lives of monks was drawn up by St Benedict of Nursia around 540 for his own monks at his abbey of Monte Cassino. Although it was itself derived from early rulers, including the Rule of St Basil and the Rule of the Master, it was almost universally adopted in western Europe, being encouraged by Pope Gregory the Great (590-604), and prescribed as the rule for monks by the Carolingian church in the early ninth century.


**SEDULIUS SCOTUS, ON CHRISTIAN RULERS**

Born and educated in Ireland (the name Scotus means 'Irishman'), Sedulius came to Frankia between 840 and 851 and attached himself to the royal court, working as a tutor, not least of the future king, Lothar II. His *On Christian Rulers*, which may have been written for that pupil, provides valuable evidence for the Church's attitude to kingship.


**Song of Roland**

Written in Old French around the year 1100, this epic poem of 4002 lines describes the disastrous defeat of the rearguard of Charlemagne's army at Roncesvalles in the Pyrenees on its way back from Spain in 778, together with what led up to it and what came after it. The hero Roland, who was leading that army, was killed there. The poem is not at all accurate as straight history, not least because it presents Roland's attackers as Saracens whereas they were in fact Christian Basques. But it is an extremely valuable source for the social relationships and attitudes of the west European military aristocracy at the end of our period, and it is instructive to compare it with *Beowulf* and the *Battle of Maldon*.


**STEPHANUS, LIFE OF BISHOP WILFRID**

This *Life* of the leading Northumbrian churchman Wilfrid (d. 709) must have been written soon after his death by Stephanus (sometimes called Eddius Stephanus), a monk of his monastery of Ripon (Yorkshire); but it seems to have been revised in 731/3. It is an extremely rich source for appreciating the wealth, power, and international connections of an early medieval bishop, and gives in many ways a quite different image of these from that presented by Bede.

Tacitus, *On Germany*

Tacitus (P. Cornelius Tacitus) was born around 55 and died around 120. He rose to be a senator, a consul in 97, and governor of Asia Minor in 112-13. In 77, he married the daughter of Agricola, who was governor of Roman Britain, and of whom he wrote his book the *Agricola*. He published *On Germany* in 97-8, and later wrote substantial works on Roman history, the *Annals* and the *Histories*. *On Germany* is an essay on the habits, nature, and organisation of the barbarian peoples living to the north and east of the Roman Empire. It is of great interest, even if it was evidently influenced by Tacitus's desire to compare the Romans unfavourably with them.


**TALIESIN, POEMS**

According to Nennius, *History of the Britons*, Aneirin was a British poet active in what appears to the period around 600. Virtually nothing else is known about him, and the dating of his poems, which are preserved in a late thirteenth-century manuscript in the National Library of Wales, is problematic. Nonetheless, they clearly comprise some material of early date, and they are of considerable interest.


**Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon***

Born in 975 and Bishop of Merseburg (Germany) from 1009 to his death in 1018, Thietmar's *Chronicon*, is a major source for the reigns of the Ottonian kings of Germany, from Henry I the Fowler to Otto III, and Otto III's immediate successor, Henry II.