

THE problem I set out to tackle in this study is bound with what is perhaps the most intriguing paradox of Old English literary history. It is generally accepted that vernacular poetry depended for its preservation on the tolerance of the monastic environment that controlled the mechanisms of recording and transmission of texts. It is true that this monopoly was not absolute. Documents were also produced in centres associated with royal households, but these seem to have specialized in writings of administrative character and purpose: law-codes, charters, wills etc.; and even so, in many instances the task of recording such a text was likewise entrusted to monastic "professionals". Laymen could certainly own texts (as is clear from the anecdote narrated by Asser about young king Alfred and his love of vernacular poetry and the determined effort that had won him the book that belonged to his mother) and we know of rare cases when they composed them (again, we can name Alfred and in a later period, Ealdorman I Ethelweard, founder of Cernel monastery and author of a Latin translation of The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle), though our knowledge does not extend to the manner in which these were written down. A document of substantial length, showing an indisputable degree of craftsmanship in the quality of script, use of decorative initials or even illuminations- which is the case of the poetic codices- can safely be identified as a product of a monastic scriptorium as an environment that cultivated such specialist skills and possessed the resources necessary for an enterprise of this kind.