

PAPER No. 016

# **AELFRIC'S COLLOQUY**

Translated from the Latin

**Ann E. Watkins**

This paper has been downloaded from [www.kentarchaeology.ac](http://www.kentarchaeology.ac). The author has placed the paper on the site for download for personal or academic use. Any other use must be cleared with the author of the paper who retains the copyright.

Please email [admin@kentarchaeology.ac](mailto:admin@kentarchaeology.ac) for details regarding copyright clearance.

The Kent Archaeological Society (Registered Charity 223382) welcomes the submission of papers. The necessary form can be downloaded from the website at [www.kentarchaeology.ac](http://www.kentarchaeology.ac)

# AELFRIC'S COLLOQUY

## INTRODUCTION

Aelfric is believed to have been a monk in Dorset and Oxfordshire about the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh centuries. He took boy pupils and wrote his colloquy (or dialogue) in Anglo Saxon and Latin to teach them the Latin language. It is written in the form of question and answer between the teacher and various workers, but the middle part is more in the form of a discussion between the workers, whilst the last part becomes a more philosophical discussion between teacher and pupils.

The text gives a vivid picture of life in the countryside at that time and portrays an interesting social picture. The workers on the land were not free, but were bound to the Lord of the Manor and did so much work in return for a small cottage and a plot of land.

Life was very harsh, farm labourers had to rise at the crack of dawn to tend to their animals and to till the land. The life of tradesmen, fishermen, cooks, bakers and lawyers as well as the harsh life in the monastery is described in the text. It is interesting to see that foreign trade took place and that luxury goods for the rich were brought back from far off places. This, again, shows the sharp contrast between the rich and poor classes.

This translation has been included in the publication *A Bexley Mosaic* 1977 which is a publication produced by a WEA class in Local History to illustrate what life was like in Bexley at that time. The description of life as shown by Aelfric is probably true of life all over England.

There does not appear to be any published English translation of the *Colloquy*, although quotations from it are found in various histories of England.

Subsequent to this publication, Melvyn Bragg, in his interesting radio four series called *The Routes of English*, quoted from parts of the *Colloquy*. After some more research, I am assured that there is no complete translation in existence.

I have attempted to translate this work from the Latin, as I have no knowledge of Anglo Saxon.

Ann E. Watkins

## **AELFRIC'S COLLOQUY**

- Pupils:** Master, we young men would like you to teach us how to speak properly and with a wide vocabulary, for we are ignorant and badly spoken
- Teacher:** How would you like to speak?
- Pupils:** We are concerned about the way we speak, as we want to speak correctly and with meaning, and not with meaningless base words. Would you beat us and make us learn? For it is better for us to be beaten to learn than to remain ignorant. However, we know that you are a kind-hearted man who would not wish to inflict blows on us unless we ask for them.
- Teacher:** I ask you to tell me what work you do. I am a monk by profession. I sing seven psalms during the day, and spend my time in reading and singing; but, however, I should like you, in the meanwhile, to learn to converse in the Latin language. What skills do your work mates possess?
- Pupils:** Some are ploughmen, some are shepherds, others are oxherds, hunters, fishermen, fowlers, merchants, leather workers, salters and bakers.
- Teacher:** Can you tell us, ploughman, how you do your work?
- Ploughman:** Master, I have to work so very hard. I go out at the crack of dawn to drive the oxen to the field and yoke them to the plough. For not even in the bitter winter would I dare to stay at home for fear of my lord; but, when I have yoked up the oxen and fastened the plough and the ploughshare to the plough, then I must plough a whole field or more for the whole day.
- Teacher:** Have you any mates?
- Ploughman:** Yes, I have one boy who drives the oxen with a goad. He is hoarse from shouting and the cold.

**Teacher:** Do you do anything more during the day?

**Ploughman:** Yes, indeed, I do very much more. I have to fill the stable with hay for the oxen, water them and take their dung outside. Alas, I have to endure such hard work since I am not a free man.

**Teacher:** Tell us, shepherd, what work do you do?

**Shepherd:** Yes, my teacher, I have much work to do. As soon as it is light, I drive the ewes to the pastures and guard them with dogs through heat and cold, so that the wolves do not devour them. I drive them to the folds, where I milk them twice a day. I move their folds and I make butter and cheese as well, and I am faithful to my lord.

**Teacher:** What did you do, oxherd?

**Oxherd:** I work very hard for my lord. When the ploughman has unyoked his oxen, I take them out to pasture and stand over them all night to guard them against thieves and again, at dawn, I give them back to the ploughman well-fed and watered.

**Teacher:** Is this man, here, one of your comrades?

**Oxherd:** Oh, yes he is.

**Teacher:** Do you have any skill?

**Hunter:** Yes, I have one skill.

**Teacher:** What is that?

**Hunter:** I am a hunter.

**Teacher:** In whose service?

**Hunter:** The King's.

**Teacher:** How do you perform your skills?

**Hunter:** I take my nets with me and set them in a suitable place, and set my hounds to pursue the beasts so

that they reach the nets unexpectedly and are ensnared. Then, while they are still trapped in the nets, I cut their throats.

**Teacher:** Do you have any other method of hunting instead of nets?

**Hunter:** Yes, indeed, I hunt without using nets.

**Teacher:** How?

**Hunter:** I chase the wild beasts with very swift hounds.

**Teacher:** What sort of beasts do you catch mainly?

**Hunter:** I catch harts, bears, does, goats and some hares.

**Teacher:** Did you go out hunting today?

**Hunter:** No, I did not, because I had to spend today on my lord's estate, but I went out hunting yesterday.

**Teacher:** What did you catch?

**Hunter:** I caught two harts and a boar.

**Teacher:** How did you catch them?

**Hunter:** I caught the harts in the nets and I cut the boar's throat.

**Teacher:** How did you dare to cut the boar's throat?

**Hunter:** My dogs drove him towards me, and I stood against him and suddenly slew him.

**Teacher:** You must have been very brave indeed.

**Hunter;** A hunter must be very brave, since all kinds of beasts lurk in the woods.

**Teacher:** What do you get from your hunting?

**Hunter:** Whatever I capture I give to the King, since I am his huntsman.

**Teacher:** What does he give you?

**Hunter:** He feeds me and clothes me, and gives me a horse and armour, so that I can perform my duties as a hunter freely.

**Teacher:** What skills do you have?

**Fisherman:** I am a fisherman.

**Teacher:** What do you gain from your skills?

**Fisherman:** I get food, clothes and money.

**Teacher:** How do you catch the fish?

**Fisherman:** I get into my boat, put my nets into the river and then I cast my bait and wicker baskets, and whatever I catch I take.

**Teacher:** What if the fish are unclean ones?

**Fisherman:** I throw out the unclean ones and I take the clean ones for food for myself.

**Teacher:** Where do you sell your fish?

**Fisherman:** In the town.

**Teacher:** Who buys them?

**Fisherman:** The townsfolk. I cannot catch as many as I can sell.

**Teacher:** What sort of fish do you catch?

**Fisherman:** I catch eels, pike, minnows and dace, trout, lamprey and any other species that swim in the rivers, like sprats.

**Teacher:** Why don't you fish in the sea?

**Fisherman:** Oh, I do sometimes, but it is seldom as I have to make a long trip by river in order to get to the sea.

**Teacher:** What do you catch in the sea?  
**Fisherman:** I catch herring, salmon, dolphins, sturgeon, oysters, crabs, mussels, cockles, flatfish, plaice, lobsters and such like.

**Teacher:** Would you like to catch a whale?  
**Fisherman:** No, I don't think so.

**Teacher:** Why not?  
**Fisherman:** Because catching whales is a dangerous business. I find it is far safer for me to go to the river with my spear than to go to the sea with many ships to hunt whales.

**Teacher:** Why is that?  
**Fisherman:** Because it is better for me to catch fish than to kill a more powerful one, as it could drown and kill with one blow, not only me but my friends as well.

**Teacher:** But many men catch whales and escape danger, as well as obtaining a large price for their catch.  
**Fisherman:** You speak the truth but I would not dare sail on account of my fears.

**Teacher:** What have you to say, birdman? Tell us how you catch birds?  
**Birdcatcher:** I have many ways of catching birds. Sometimes I use nets, sometimes snares, sometimes lime, sometimes by using a decoy, sometimes with hawks and sometimes traps.

**Teacher:** Do you have any hawks?  
**Birdcatcher:** Oh, yes, I do.

**Teacher:** Do you know how to tame them?  
**Birdcatcher:** Indeed I do. What use would they be to me if I did not know how to tame them?  
**Teacher:** Give me one of your hawks.

- Birdcatcher:** I would give you one with pleasure if you gave me one of your fast hounds in exchange. Which hawk would you prefer the bigger or the smaller one?
- Teacher:** Give me the bigger one. How do you feed your hawks?
- Birdcatcher:** In winter they feed both themselves and me, but in the spring I set them free to fly away to the woods, and in the autumn, I catch young birds and tame them.
- Teacher:** But why do you let your birds fly away from you?
- Birdcatcher:** Because I do not want to feed them in summer and because they eat too much.
- Teacher:** But many men feed their tame hawks in summer in order to have them ready.
- Birdcatcher:** Indeed, they do, but I do not want to have the task of looking after them, and I know that other men can catch not only one but several.
- Teacher:** What have you to tell us, merchant?
- Merchant:** I embark on board ship with my wares and I sail over remote seas, sell my wares and buy precious objects that are unknown in this country. I bring these things to you over the sea enduring great danger and shipwreck with the whole of my goods hurled overboard and with me hardly escaping with my life.
- Teacher:** What sort of wares do you bring us?
- Merchant:** I bring purple cloth and silk, precious stones and gold, various sorts of clothes and dyes, wine and oil, ebony and brass, tin and brimstone, glass and like products.
- Teacher;** Do you want to sell your goods here when you have bought them elsewhere?
- Merchant:** I don't want to, but where else can I make a profit from my work? I want the selling price to be dearer

than the purchase price so that I can make some money to feed my wife and sons.

**Teacher:** How do you practise your skill, tanner, for our benefit?

**Tanner:** My art is both useful and necessary.

**Teacher:** How is your craft useful and necessary?

**Tanner:** I buy hides and skins and prepare them with my skill. I make many styles of shoes from them, baskets and clogs, boots and buckets, bridles and harness, flasks and leather bottles, spurs and halters, bags and purses, not one of you would like to spend the winter without my skills.

**Teacher:** Salter, how does your craft benefit us?

**Salter:** Everyone benefits a great deal from my skill. No-one enjoys his breakfast or dinner unless my skill is present in it.

**Teacher:** How is that?

**Salter:** Who enjoys his meals without the flavouring of salt? Who can replenish his saltcellars without the prompt supply which my skill provides? Indeed, all the butter and cheese would go bad unless I looked after it. You would not be able to use your vegetables without my skill.

**Teacher:** What do you say, baker, how does your skill benefit us, or can we lead our live without it?

**Baker:** You can live for some time without my craft, but you cannot live well for a long time without it. For without my craft the whole table would appear bare, and without bread all your food would become vomit. I put new heart into man, I see the strength of men and not even small children would with to shun me.

**Teacher:** What can we say about you, cook? Do we have need of any of your skills?

- Cook:** The cook replies: If you drive me away from your community you would eat your vegetables raw and your meat rare; and, moreover, without my skill, you would be unable to have good rich broth.
- Teacher:** We do not care about your skill, it is of no importance to us, since we can cook what needs to be cooked and eat what needs to be eaten.
- Cook:** If you did drive me out, as you would like to do, then you would all be cooks and no one would be your Lord. Moreover, without my skill you would not eat. I have proved to you, since you have asked me, monk, that I have good useful acquaintances. Who are my friends? Well, they are smiths, black smiths, farriers, goldsmiths, silver smiths, bronze smiths, wood workers, and many other skilled craftsmen.
- Teacher;** Do you have any good lawyer to advise you?
- Cook:** Oh, indeed, I have. What power would our gathering have without a King's Counsel?
- Teacher:** What have you to tell us, wise man? What skill out of these seems to be the most important in your opinion?
- Lawyer:** I tell you that the service of God as it is written in the Gospels seems to be the most important consideration to me. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his justice, and all these things will be added unto you".
- Teacher:** But, what do you think are the most important secular skills?
- Lawyer:** Oh, agriculture (without doubt) for the plough feeds us all. The blacksmith replies: "Where does the ploughshare or the coulter come from unless it has the impetus of my skill? Where does the harpoon for the fisherman, or the scissors for the tailor or the needles for the suit makers? Surely, they come from my skill"?  
The lawyer replies: "What you say is true but it is much better for all of us to be hospitable to you,

ploughman, than to you, blacksmith, because the ploughman provides us with bread and food: but what do you give us in your work except shining steel and the noise of clanging hammers and puffing bellows”?

The carpenter makes his point: “Who of you does not use my skill? Since your houses, cottages and ships have all been fashioned by my skill”.

The blacksmith replies: “Why do you say such things, carpenter? For you cannot make one window pane strong without my skill”.

The lawyer replies: “My friends and fellow workers, let us quickly resolve these arguments and let there be peace and concord among you and let each one of us show your skill to the other and let us meet together at the ploughman’s house where we may have food for ourselves and fodder for our horses. This is the advice I give to all workers so that each one may practise his art more conscientiously, since he who neglects his skill will himself be separate from it, whether he be priest, monk, or layman or soldier. Put your whole being into this and be yourself; for it is very damaging and deceiving for a man to wish to be what he is not than to be what he is”.

**Teacher:** Well then, boys, how did this speech appeal to you?

**Boys:** We liked it very much, but you would have spoken profoundly and that you would have delivered your sermon to suit our age, but speak to us according to your reasoning powers, so that we can understand what you say.

**Teacher:** I ask you why are you so keen to learn?

**Boys:** We do not want to be as the wild beasts, who know of nothing but grass and water.

**Teacher:** but what do you want?

**Boys:** We want to be wise.

**Teacher:** How do you want to be wise? Do you want to be cunning or skilled in many types of begging, or do you want to be skilled in speaking or clever in poetry, good speakers and bad thinkers, given to

soft words, but nursing jealousy in his heart like a sepulchre in an ornate monument which is full of bad odours within.

**Boys:** We do not want to be wise, since a man who deceives himself with pretence is not wise.

**Teacher:** How do you want to be wise?

**Boys:** We want to be simple men without hypocrisy, and wise so that we can refrain from doing evil by doing good. You reason more deeply than we can understand at our age, but tell us in your own language and not so profoundly.

**Teacher:** I shall do as you ask. You, boy, what did you do, today?

**Boy:** I have done many things – last night, when I heard the alarm, I rose from my bed, went out to the church and sang evensong with the brothers, then we sang about all the sacred offices and morning praises, after those, prime and seven psalms with the litany and first mass of the day. After that, we sang the sixth service, and then we ate, drank and slept, and then again, we got up and sang nones. And so, here we are with you, and we are ready to listen to what you have to say.

**Teacher:** When do you want to sing Vespers and Compline?

**Boy:** When the time comes.

**Teacher:** Have you been beaten today?

**Boy:** No, I haven't since I behaved cautiously.

**Teacher:** What about your friends?

**Boy:** Why do you ask me that? For, I dare not reveal our secrets to you. Each one of us knows if he has been beaten or not.

**Teacher:** What have you eaten, today?

**Boy:** I have eaten meat, since I am a boy bending beneath the rod.

**Teacher:** What else did you eat?

**Boy:** I have eaten with grateful relish, vegetables, eggs, fish and cheese and all clean food.

**Teacher:** Indeed, you must feel uplifted since you have eaten all that was put before you.

**Boy:** Indeed, I was not so hungry as to eat all the variety of food in one sitting.

**Teacher:** Why is that?

**Boy;** I eat one sort of food at one time and another at a different time with sobriety as becomes a novice and not ravenously since I am not a glutton.

**Teacher:** What did you have to drink?

**Boy:** I drink ale, usually, if I drink at all, and water if I have no ale.

**Teacher:** Don't you drink wine?

**Boy:** No, I am not rich enough to be able to buy myself wine: Wine is not a drink for boys or fools but for old men and wise men.

**Teacher:** Where do you sleep?

**Boy:** I sleep in a dormitory with the brothers.

**Teacher:** Who wakes you up at night?

**Boy:** Sometimes I hear the alarm and get up, and sometimes the master wakes me up harshly with a rod.

**Teacher:** Novice monks and dear pupils, your teacher urges you to obey the divine discipline and to keep it well wherever you may be, behave correctly when you meet your companions in church, and enter into the sermon, and bow in a prayerful manner to all

the high altars; stand with dignity and sing in unison; make intercession for your sins and go out into the cloister or the recreation room without any fooling about.

FINIS