

The Battle of Brunanburh

The physical details of the battle at Brunanburh are scanty. History records the date (937 A.D.) and the names of the important leaders: Aethelstan and Eadmund leading the English; Constantine and Anlaf leading the Picts and Vikings. But the impetus for the battle is conjecture, as is its location.

That the battle was an event of great cultural significance is clear from the tone of the poem. A close reading of *The Battle of Brunanburh*, combined with historical knowledge of the reigns of Alfred, Eadweard and Aethelstan, suggests that Britain, which had previously been a loose confederation of Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (known as the Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy), had finally become a unified kingdom capable of celebrating its national and artistic maturity.

The poem is recorded in four manuscript copies of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. It is not clear whether the poem was written specifically for the *Chronicle* or whether it was an independent piece that was incorporated into later manuscript copies of the *Chronicle* (a distinct possibility). Regardless, it survives as the sole entry for the year 937.

The poem is both self-consciously artistic, with strict meter and high poetic diction, and politically aware. It is self-conscious poetry that seeks to legitimize the focus of its praise, the reigning aristocracy, and to instill national pride in its audience. The poem commemorates the martial prowess of a well-governed people and demonstrates its artistic skill as well.

The Battle of Brunanburh

Her Aethelstan cyning, eorla dryhten,
beorna beag-giefa, and his brothor eac,
Eadmund aetheling, ealdor-langetir
geslogon aet saecce sweorda ecgum
ymbe Brunanburh. Bord-weall clufon,
heowon heathu-linde hamora lafum
eaforan Eadweardes, swa him ge-aethele waes
fram cneo-magum thaet hie aet campe oft
with lathra gehwone land ealgodon,
hord and hamas. Hettend crungon,
Scotta leode and scip-flotan,
faege feollon. Feld dennode
secga swate siththan sunne upp
on morgen-tid, maere tungol,
glad ofer grundas, Godes candel beorht,
eces Dryhtnes, oth seo aethele gesceaft
sag to setle. Thaer laeg secg manig
garum agieted, guma Northerna
ofer sciold scoten, swelce Scyttisc eac,
werig, wiges saed.
West-Seaxe forth
andlange daeg eorod-cystum
on last legdon lathum theodum,

heowon here-flieman hindan thearle
mecum mylen-scearpum. Mierce ne wierndon
heardes hand-plegan haeletha nanum
thara-the mid Anlafe ofer ear-gebland
on lides bosme land gesohton,
faege to gefeohte. Fife lagon
on tham camp-stede cyningas geonge,
sweordum answefede, swelce seofone eac
eorlas Anlafes, unrim herges,
flotena and Scotta. Thaere gefliemed wearth
North-manna brego, niede gebaeded,
to lides stefne lytle weorode;
cread cnear on flot, cyning ut gewat
on fealone flod, feorh generede.
Swelce thaere eac se froda mid fleame com
on his cyththe north, Constantinus,
har hilde-rinc. Hreman ne thorfte
meca gemanan; he waes his maga sceard,
freonda gefielled on folc-stede,
beslaegen aet saecce, and his sunu forlet
on wael-stowe wundum forgrunden,
geongne aet guthe. Gielpa ne thorfte
beorn blanden-feax bill-gesliehtes,
eald inwitta, ne Anlaf thy ma;

mid hira here-lafum hliehhan ne thorfton
thaet hie beadu-weorca beteran wurdon
on camp-stede cumbol-gehnastes,
gar-mittunge, gumena gemotes,
waepen-gewrixles, thaes hie on wael-felda
with Eadwardes eaforan plegodon.

Gewiton him tha North-menn naegled-cnearrum,
dreorig darotha laf, on Dinges mere
ofer deop waeter Dyflin secan,
eft Ira lang aewisc-mode.

Swelce tha gebrothor begen aetsamne,
cynig and aetheling, cyththe sohton,
West Seaxna lang, wiges hremge.

Leton him behindan hraew bryttian
sealwig-padan, thone sweartan hraefn
hyrned-nebban, and thone hasu-padan,
earn aeftan hwit, aeses brucan,—
graedigne guth-hafoc, and thaet graege deor,
wulf on wealda.

Ne wearth wael mare
on thys ig-lande aefre gieta
folces gefielled beforan thissum

sweordes ecgum, thaes-the us secgath bec,
eald uthwitan, siththan eastan hider
Engle and Seaxe upp becomon,
ofer brad brimu Britene sohton,
wlance wig-smithas, Wealas ofercomon,
eorlas ar-hwaete eard begeaton.

The Battle of Brunanburh

In this year King Aethelstan, Lord of warriors,
ring-giver to men, and his brother also,
Prince Eadmund, won eternal glory
in battle with sword edges
around Brunanburh. They split the shield-wall,
they hewed battle shields with the remnants of hammers.
The sons of Eadweard, it was only befitting their noble descent
from their ancestors that they should often
defend their land in battle against each hostile people,
horde and home. The enemy perished,
Scots men and seamen,
fated they fell. The field flowed
with blood of warriors, from sun up
in the morning, when the glorious star
glided over the earth, God's bright candle,
eternal lord, till that noble creation
sank to its seat. There lay many a warrior
by spears destroyed; Northern men
shot over shield, likewise Scottish as well,
weary, war sated.
The West-Saxons pushed onward
all day; in troops
they pursued the hostile people.

They hewed the fugitive grievously from behind
with swords sharp from the grinding.
The Mercians did not refuse hard hand-play to any warrior
who came with Anlaf over the sea-surge
in the bosom of a ship, those who sought land,
fated to fight. Five lay dead
on the battle-field, young kings,
put to sleep by swords, likewise also seven
of Anlaf's earls, countless of the army,
sailors and Scots. There the North-men's chief was put
to flight, by need constrained
to the prow of a ship with little company:
he pressed the ship afloat, the king went out
on the dusky flood-tide, he saved his life.
Likewise, there also the old campaigner through flight came
to his own region in the north — Constantine —
hoary warrior. He had no reason to exult
the great meeting; he was of his kinsmen bereft,
friends fell on the battle-field,
killed at strife: even his son, young in battle, he left
in the place of slaughter, ground to pieces with wounds.
That grizzle-haired warrior had no
reason to boast of sword-slaughter,
old deceitful one, no more did Anlaf;

with their remnant of an army they had no reason to
laugh that they were better in deed of war
in battle-field-collision of banners,
encounter of spears, encounter of men,
trading of blows — when they played against
the sons of Eadweard on the battle field.

Departed then the Northmen in nailed ships.
The dejected survivors of the battle,
sought Dublin over the deep water,
leaving Dinges mere
to return to Ireland, ashamed in spirit.
Likewise the brothers, both together,
King and Prince, sought their home,
West-Saxon land, exultant from battle.
They left behind them, to enjoy the corpses,
the dark coated one, the dark horny-beaked raven
and the dusky-coated one,
the eagle white from behind, to partake of carrion,
greedy war-hawk, and that gray animal
the wolf in the forest.
Never was there more slaughter
on this island, never yet as many
people killed before this

with sword's edge: never according to those who tell us
from books, old wisemen,
since from the east Angles and Saxons came up
over the broad sea. Britain they sought,
Proud war-smiths who overcame the Welsh,
glorious warriors they took hold of the land.

Line by Line Translation with Glosses

This is the original Old English text, slightly modernized, but substantively unchanged from the manuscript readings. The lines below have been grouped as hemistichs, or half lines (as they were probably composed). Each hemistich is followed by a fairly literal translation; each line is followed by definitions of the more difficult words.

Her Aethelstan cyning,
In this year King Aethelstan,
eorla dryhten,
Lord of warriors,

- › Her - Literally “Here.” Not an integral part of the poem, *Her* is found at the opening of *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entries and is usually translated “In this year.”
- › cyning - “king”
- › eorla - (genitive plural) “of earls,” “of warriors”
- › dryhten - “Lord”

beorna beag-giefa,
ring-giver to men,
and his brother eac,
and his brother also,

- › beorna - (dative pl.) “to men”
- › beag-giefa - “ring-giver”
- › eac - “also”

Eadmund aetheling,

Prince Eadmund,

ealdor-lange tir

eternal glory

- › aetheling - “prince”
- › ealdor-lang - “age-long,” “glory”
- › tir - “glory”

geslogon aet saecce

they won in battle

sweorda ecgum

with sword edges

- › geslogon - (3 p.p. past) “they won”
- › saecce - “strife,” “battle”

ymbe Brunanburh.

around Brunanburh.

Bord-weall clufon

Shield-wall they split

- › ymbe - “around”
- › Bord-weall - Literally “Board-wall,” in this case “shield-wall”
- › clufon - (3 p.p. past) “the split” (cf. to cleave)

heowon heathu-linde

they hewed battle shields (of linden)

hamora lafum,

with the remnants of hammers

- › heowon - (3 p.p. past) “they hewed”
- › heathu-linde - “battle-shields” (made of linden wood)
- › hamora lafum - Literally “the remnants or leavings of hammers,” i.e. “forged swords”

eaforan Eadweardes,
the sons of Eadweard,

swa him ge-aethele waes
it was only befitting their noble descent

- › eaforan - “sons”
- › swa - with *waes* this trans. “it was only”
- › him - in this case “their”
- › ge-aethele - “befitting noble descent”

fram cneo-magum,
from their ancestors

thaet hie aet campe oft
that they in battle often

- › cneo-magum - “ancestors”
- › hie - “they”
- › campe - “battle”

with lathra gehwone
against hostile ones

land ealgodon,
their land defend

- › lathra - (adj.) “hostile,” “hateful,” “hated”
- › gehwone - “each”
- › ealgodon - (3 pp. subj.) “they might defend”

hord and hamas.

treasure (horde) and home.

Hettend crungon,

The enemy perished,

- › Hettend - “The Enemy”
- › crungon - (3 pp. past) “fell in battle,” “perished”

Scotta leode

Scots men

and scip-flotan,

and seamen

- › leode - “people”
- › scip-flotan - “seaman,” “sailor”; literally “ship-floater”

faege feollon.

fated they fell.

Feld dennode

The field flowed

- › faege - “fated”
- › feollon - (3 p.p. past) “they fell”
- › Feld - “The field”
- › dennode - (3 p.s. past) “flowed”

secga swate

with blood of warriors,

siththan sunne upp

from sun up

- › secga - (genitive pl.) “of warriors”
- › swate - “blood”
- › siththan - “from”

on morgen-tid,
in the morning,

maere tungol,
glorious star

- › maere - “glorious”
- › tungol - “star”

glad ofer grundas,
glided over the earth,

Godes candel beorht,
God’s bright candle,

- › glad - (3 p.s. past) “glided”
- › grundas - “ground,” “land,” “surface of the earth”
- › beorht - “bright”

eces Dryhtnes,
eternal lord,

oth seo aethele gesceaft
till that noble creation

- › eces - “eternal”
- › Dryhtnes - “Lord”
- › oth - “till”
- › seo - “that”
- › aethele - “noble”
- › gesceaft - “creature,” “creation”

sag to setle.
sank to [its] seat.

Thær laeg secg manig

There lay many a warrior

- › sag - (3 p.s. past) “sank”
- › setle - “seat”
- › secg - “man,” “warrior”

garum agieted,

by spears destroyed

guma Northerna

Northern men

- › garum - “by spears”
- › agieted - “destroyed”
- › guma - “man”

ofer sciold scoten,

shot over shield

swelce Scyttisc eac,

likewise Scottish as well,

- › swelce - “likewise”

werig, wiges saed.

weary, war sated.

West-Seaxe forth

West-Saxons went forth

- › wiges - “battle,” “war”
- › saed - “sated”
- › forth - “forth”; in this case “went forth”

andlange daeg

the entire day

eorod-cystum

in troops

- › eorod-cystum - “troops,” “a picked company”

on last legdon

they pursued

lathum theodum,

the hostile people.

- › legdon - (3 pp. past) elliptically with on last, “pursued”
- › lathum - “hostile,” “hated,” “hateful”
- › theodum - “people”

heowon here-flieman

they hewed the fugitive

hindan thearle

from behind grievously

- › heowon - (3 p.p. past) “they hewed”
- › here-flieman - “the fugitive”
- › hindan - “from behind”
- › thearle - “grievously”

mecum mylen-scearpum.

with swords sharp from the grinding

Mierce ne wierndon

The Mercians did not refuse

- › mecum - “with swords”
- › mylen-scearpum - “sharp from the grinding”
- › Mierce - “The Mercians”
- › wierndon - (3 p.p. past) “refuse,” “deny,” “withhold”

hardes hand-plegan

hard hand-to-hand combat

haeletha nanum

to any warrior

- › haeletha - “men,” “warriors”
- › nanum - “not one,” “none”

thara-the mid Anlafa

They who with Anlafa

ofer ear-gebland

over the sea-surge

- › thara-the - “they who”
- › mid - “with,” “by”
- › Anlafa - “Anlaf.” Leader of the Vikings who came from a settlement around modern-day Dublin.
- › ear-gebland - “sea-surge”

on lides bosme

in the bosom of a ship

land gesohton,

sought lang,

- › lides - “of a ship”
- › gesohton - (3 p.p. past) “sought”

faege to gefeohte.

fated to fight.

Fife lagon

Five lay dead

- › faeg - “fated”
- › gefeohte - “to fight”
- › Fife - “Five”
- › lagon - (3 p.p. past) “lay dead”

on tham camp-stede

on the battle-field

cyningas geonge,

young kings

- › camp-stede - “battle-field”

sweordum answefed,

by swords put to sleep,

swelce seofone eac

likewise also seven

- › answefed - “put to sleep”
- › welce - “likewise”
- › seofone - “seven”

eorlas Anlafes,

of Anlafa’s earls,

unrim herges,

countless of the army,

- › unrim - “countless”
- › herges - “of the army”

flotena and Scotta.

sailors and Scots.

Thaere gefliemed wearth

There took to flight

- › flotena - “sailors”
- › gefliemed - “put to flight”
- › wearth - (3 p.s. past) “was”

North-manna brego,

the North-men’s chief,

niede gebaeded,

by need constrained

- › brego - “chief”
- › niede - “by need,” “by necessity”
- › gebaeded - “was constrained”

to lides stefne

to prow of ship

lytle weorode;

with little company:

- › lides - “ship”
- › stefne - “prow”
- › weorode - “band of men,” “host”

cread cnear on flot,

he pressed the ship afloat,

cyning ut gewat

the king went out

- › cread - “press on”
- › cnear - “ship”
- › flot - “float” with on “afloat”
- › ut - “out”
- › gewat - here, “of knowledge”

on fealone flod,
 on the dusky flood-tide,
feorh generede.
 he saved his life.

- › fealone - “dusky,” “dark”
- › feorh - “life”
- › generede - (3 p.s. past) “he saved”

Swelce thaere eac se froda
 Likewise, there also the old campaigner

mid fleame com
 through flight came

- › froda - with se “the old campaigner”
- › fleame - “through flight”
- › com - (3 p.s. past) “came”

on his cyththe north,
 to his own region in the north,

Constantinus,
 Constantine,

- › cyththe - “home”
- › Constantinus - Constantine III, king of the Picts

har hilde-rinc.

hoary warrior.

Hreman ne thorfte

He had no reason to exult

- › har - “hoary,” “gray,” “old”
- › hilde-rinc - “warrior”
- › Hreman - “To exult”
- › thorfte - (3 p.s. past) “had no reason”

meca gemanan;

the great meeting;

he waes his maga sceard,

he was of his kinsmen bereft

- › meca - “great”
- › gemanan - “meeting”; with an ironic twist, “fellowship”
- › maga - “of kinsmen”
- › sceard - “bereft”

freonda gefielled

friends fell

on folc-stede,

on the battle-field

- › folc-stede - “battle-field”

beslaegen aet saecce,

killed as strife,

and his sunu forlet

and [even] his son he left

- › saecce - “strife,” “battle”
- › sunu - “son”
- › forlet - (3 p.s. past) “left,” “abandoned”

on wael-stowe

in the place of slaughter

wundum forgrunden,

with wounds ground to pieces,

- › wael-stowe - “place of slaughter,” “battle-field”
- › forgrunden - “ground to pieces,” “destroyed”

geongne aet guthe.

young in battle.

Gielpan ne thorfte

To boast he had no need,

- › guthe - “battle”
- › Gielpan - “To boast”
- › thorfte - (3 p.s. past) “had no reason”

beorn blanden-feax

the grizzle-haired warrior,

bill-geslichtes,

of sword-slaughter,

- › beorn - “warrior,” “man”
- › blanden-feax - “grizzle-haired”
- › bill-geslichtes - “of the sword-slaughter”

eald inwitta,

old deceitful one,

ne Anlaf thy ma;

no more did Anlaf;

- › inwitta - “malicious one,” “deceitful one”
- › thy - “than”
- › ma - “more”

mid hira here-lafum

with their remnant of an army

hliehhan ne thorfton

to laugh they had no reason,

- › hira - “their”
- › here-lafum - “remnant of an army”
- › hliehhan - “laugh”
- › thorfton - (3 p.p. past) “have reason to”

thaet hie beadu-weorca

that they in deed of war

beteran wurdon

were better

- › beadu-weorca - “deed of war”
- › wurdon - (3 p.p. past) “were”

on camp-stede

in battle field

cumbol-gehnastes,

collision of banners,

- › cumbol-gehnastes - “collision of banners”

gar-mittunge,
encounter of spears,

gumena gemotes,
encounter of men,

- › gar-mittunge - “encounter of spears”
- › gumena - “men”
- › gemotes - “meeting,” “encounter”

waepen-gewrixles,
exchange of weapons,

thaes hie on wael-felda
when on the battle-field

- › waepen-gewrixles - “weapon-exchange”; i.e. trading blows
- › wael-felda - “battle-field”

with Eadweardes
with Edward’s

eaforan plegodon.
sons they played.

- › eaforan - “sons”
- › plegodon - (3 p.p. past) “played”

Gewiton him tha North-menn
Departed then the Northmen

naegled-cnearrum,
in nailed ships.

- › Gewiton - (3 p.p. past) “Went,” “Departed”
- › naegled-cnearrum - “nailed-ship”

dreorig darotha laf,

Dejected survivors of the battle,

on Dinges mere

at Dinges Mere

- › dreorig - “sad,” “dejected”
- › “darotha - “of spears”
- › laf - “remnants”; with darotha “survivors of the battle”
- › Dinges mere - “Dinges mere”; i.e., Dinges lake. Location has not been identified.

ofer deop waeter

over deep water

Dyflin secan,

Dublin they sought,

- › Dyflin - “Dublin”
- › secan - (3 p.p. past) “sought”

and eft Ira land,

back to Ireland,

aewisc-mode.

ashamed in spirit.

- › aewisc-mode - “ashamed in spirit”

Swelce tha gebrothor

Likewise the brothers

begen aetsamne,

both together,

- › gebrothor - “brothers”
- › begen - “both”
- › aetsamne - “together”

cyning and aetheling,
King and Prince

cyththe sohton,
home sought,

- › cyththe - “home”

West Seaxna lang,
West-Saxon land,

wiges hremge.
from battle exultant.

- › wiges - “from battle”
- › hremge - “exultant”

Leton him behindan
They left behind them the

hraew bryttian
corpses to enjoy

- › Leton - (3 p.p. past) “They left
- › hraew - “corpses”
- › bryttian - “to distribute,” “to divide,” hence “dispose of,”
“enjoy”

sealwig-padan,
the dark coated one,

thone sweartan hraefn

the dark raven

- › sealwig-padan - “dark-coated one”
- › sweartan - “dark,” “black”
- › hraefne - “raven”

hyrned-nebban,

horny-beaked,

and thone hasu-padan,

and the dusky-coated one

- › hyrned-nebban - “horny-beaked one”
- › hasu-padan - “dusky-coated one”

earn aeftan hwit,

the eagle white from behind,

aeses brucan —

to partake of carrion,

- › aeses - “of carrion”
- › brucan - “to enjoy,” “to partake”

graedigne guth-hafoc,

greedy war-hawk,

and thaet graege deor,

and that gray animal

- › graedigne - “greedy”
- › guth-hafoc - “war-hawk”
- › deor - “animal”

wulf on wealda.

the wolf in the forest.

Ne wearth wael mare

Never was there more slaughter

- › wealda - “forest”
- › wearth - (3 p.s. past) “was”
- › wael - “slaughter”
- › mare - “more”

on thys ig-lande

on this island,

aefre gieta

never yet as many

- › aefre - “ever”
- › gieta - “yet”

folces gefielled

people killed

beforan thissum

before this

- › folces - “people,” “army,” “host”
- › gefielled - “felled,” “killed”

sweordes ecgum,

with sword’s edge,

thaes-the us secgath bec,

those who tell us from books,

- › thaes-the - “those who”
- › secgath - (3 p.p. present) “tell,” “relate,” “say”
- › bec - “from books”

eald uthwitan,
old wisemen,

siththan eastan hider
since hither from the east

- › uthwitan - “wise men”

Engle and Seaxe
Angles and Saxons

upp becomon,
came up

ofer brad brimu
over the broad sea

Britene sohton,
Britain they sought,

- › brimu - “sea”

wlance wig-smithas,
Proud war-smiths

Wealas ofercomon,
the Welsh they overcame,

- › wlance - “proud,” “high-spirited”
- › wig-smithas - “war-smiths”
- › Wealas - “Welshmen”

eorlas ar-hwaete
glorious warriors

eard begeaton.
they took hold of the land.

- › ar-hwaete - “glorious”
- › eard - “of the land”
- › begeaton - (3 p.p. past) “took hold”

The Battle of Brunanburh

Following is Alfred, Lord Tennyson's famous 1876 translation of the poem.

Athelstan King,
Lord among Earls,
Bracelet-bestower and
Baron of Barons,
He with his Brother,
Edmund Atheling,
Gaining a lifelong
Glory in battle,
Slew with the sword-edge
There by Brunanburh,
Broke the shield-wall,
Hew'd the linden-wood,
Hack'd the battle-shield,
Sons of Edward with hammer'd brands.
Theirs was a greatness
Got from their grand-sires—
Theirs that so often in
Strife with their enemies
Struck for their hoards and their hearths
and their homes.
Bow'd the spoiler,
Bent the Scotsman,
Fell the ship-crews
Doom'd to the death.
All the field with blood of the fighters
Flow'd, from when the first the great

Sun-star of morning-tide
Lamp of the Lord God
Lord everlasting,
Glode over earth till the glorious creature
Sank to his setting.
There lay many a man
Marr'd by the javelin,
Men of the Northland
Shot over shield.
There was the Scotsman
Weary of war.
We the West-Saxons,
Long as the daylight
Lasted, in companies
Troubled the track of
the host that we hated;
Grimly with swords that were sharp
from the grindstone,
Fiercely we hack'd at the flyers before us.
Mighty the Mercian,
Hard was his hand-play,
Sparing not any of
Those that with Anlaf,
Warriors over the
Weltering waters
Borne in the bark's-bosom
Drew to this island—
Doom'd to the death.
Five young kings put asleep by the sword-stroke,
Seven strong earls of the army of Anlaf
Fell on the war-field, numberless numbers, Shipmen and

Scotsmen.

Then the Norse leader—
Dire was his need of it,
Few were his following—
Fled to his war-ship;
Fleeted his vessel to sea with the king in it,
Saving his life on the fallow flood.
Also the crafty one,
Constantinus,
Crept to his North again,
Hoar-headed hero!
Slender warrant had
He to be proud of
The welcome of war-knives—
He that was reft of his
Folk and his friends that had
Fallen in conflict,
Leaving his son too
Lost in the carnage,
Mangled to morsels,
A youngster in war!
Slender reason had
He to be glad of
The clash of the war-glaive—
Traitor and trickster
And spurner of treaties—
He nor had Anlaf
With armies so broken
A reason for bragging
That they had the better
In perils of battle

On places of slaughter—
The struggle of standards,
The rush of the javelins,
The crash of the charges,
The wielding of weapons—
The play that they play'd with
The children of Edward.
Then with their nail'd prow
Parted the Norsemen, a
Blood-redden'd relic of
Javelins over
The jarring breaker, the deep-sea billow,
Shaping their way toward Dyflen again,
Shamed in their souls.
Also the brethren,
King and Atheling,
Each in his glory,
Went to his own in his own West-Saxonland,
Glad of the war.
Many a carcase they left to be carrion,
Many a livid one, many a sallow-skin—
Left for the white-tail'd eagle to tear it, and
Left for the horny-nibb'd raven to rend it, and
Gave to the garbaging war-hawk to gorge it, and
That gray beast, the wolf of the weald.
Never had huger
Slaughter of heroes
Slain by the sword edge—
Such as old writers
Have writ of in histories—
Hapt in this isle, since

Up from the East hither
Saxon and Angle from
Over the broad billow
Broke into Britain with
Haughty war-workers who
Harried the Welshman, when
Earls that were lured by the
Hunger of glory gat
Hold of the land.

Language

Old English (OE), or Anglo-Saxon, is the name given to the English language before the year 1100. Extant documents written in the language date from about 700 to about 1100, but the great bulk of written material represents the speech from about 900 to 1050. The language was spoken in four dialects: Northumbrian, Mercian, Kentish, and West-Saxon. The majority of the manuscripts, most containing anything worth reading as literature, are West-Saxon.

The dominance of West-Saxon literature during the period demonstrates the political and artistic vitality of the kingdom of West Saxon (Wessex). The most famous King of Wessex, an important patron of literature and an author himself, was Alfred the Great (who ruled from 871 to 899).

This dominance of Old English literature by West-Saxon documents adds a twist to the study of the development of English. It was the Mercian dialect, not the West Saxon, that eventually dominated and evolved into Chaucer's Middle English and our Modern English. West-Saxon literature is the ancestor of nearly all English literature, but the West-Saxon language is not.

The dialects spoken by the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Frisians at the time of their initial settlement in Britain were, of course, no different from the dialects spoken in their Germanic homelands. As the generations passed, and as the Anglo-Saxons became relatively isolated from their European cousins, spoken language evolved into the dialects mentioned above.

In 597, with the introduction of Christianity, came the introduction of Latin literacy. The Anglo-Saxons had made

use of a runic alphabet before this date, but they had compiled no substantial literature; the pagan culture was essentially oral. Eventually documents of the spoken dialects of Old English were recorded using a modification of the Latin and runic alphabets. A few letters differ from our modern alphabet: the “eth,” ð (which looks something like the letter “d” with a cross line through the vertical) and “yogh,” ȝ (printed as a g in modern editions) were borrowed from Irish Latin; the “thorn,” þ (which looks something like the letter “p” but with the vertical extending above nearly as far as below) and “wynn” (printed as w in modern editions) were runes; the “ash,” æ (the letters AE and ae merged into one symbol) is a Latin digraph. Thorn and eth are equivalent to “th” in modern English and are printed as such in this text.

In comparison to Modern English, Old English was written relatively “phonetically.” When reading, each letter is individually sounded, even double consonants and those occurring in initial consonant clusters, such as *hring*, *hlaford*, and *gnornian*. Vowels, because of the origins of the spelling system, had a similar value to that in Latin or modern European languages.

Like German, Old English is a highly inflected language. Nouns exhibited agreement for number, gender, and case. There were four cases (nominative, accusative, genitive, and dative) and three genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter). Traces of dual number and of instrumental case existed in the personal pronouns and the definite article respectively. Nouns possessed distinct sets of inflectional endings, by which they can be classified as strong or weak nouns. Adjectives could adopt these strong or weak endings. Verbs also underwent complex inflectional changes indicating tense.

Old English was a mature and rich language. The vocabulary available to describe the world of nature was copious and precise. The same is true of the vocabulary of war. The poet of *The Battle of Brunanburh* uses several different word combinations to describe battle and battle-field: *saece*, *campe*, *wiges*, *guthe*, *bill-gesliehtes*, *cumbol-gehnastes*, *gar-mittunge*, *waepen-gewrixles*; and, *camp-stede*, *folc-stede*, *wael-felda*. Each is rich with its own nuances.

The information above is based largely on the introduction to *The Elements of Old English*, by Samuel Moore, Thomas A. Knott, and James R. Hulbert (Ann Arbor: The George Wahr Publishing Co., 1977) and on *The History of the English Language*, by David Burnley (London: Longman, 1992).

Anglo-Saxon Prosody

The powerful accents of the Anglo-Saxon language supply a natural basis for a heavily accented verse form. The standard Anglo-Saxon line consists of four strongly stressed syllables arranged, together with any number of unstressed syllables, in two hemistichs (or half lines) of two stresses each. Stressed syllables frequently alliterate, and lines are normally not structured within stanzas; instead they follow one after another. The two hemistichs are separated by an invariable medial caesura, or innate pause. “Rests” and the occasional omission of stressed syllables (especially in the second hemistich) provide a sort of syncopation or counterpoint which keeps the verse structure varied and expressive.

The information above is based largely on the entry for “English Prosody” in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger, Frank J. Warnke and O. B. Hardison, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974).

Notes

Introduction

A twelfth-century chronicler, Florence of Worcester, states that the battle took place near the Humber (the river forming the southern boundry of Northumbria) near the eastern coast. Modern historians, however, believe that a location in the west—north of Chester or perhaps southwestern Scotland—is more likely.

Alfred the Great, Eadweard, and Aethelstan

Throughout the ninth century there were periodic Viking raids on the east coast of Britain. These intensified after 865, with a Danish king ruling East Anglia late in the century. The Vikings began to expand westward, encroaching upon the kingdom of the West Saxons, Wessex. After years of fighting, Alfred the Great (king from 871-99) was able to win a singular battle over the Viking king, Guthrum. Eadwearde, son of Alfred, ruled from 899-924, maintaining the superiority of the West Saxons over all others. It was Aethelstan, grandson of Alfred, who won the battle of Brunanburh, signaling the end of Viking raids for more than a century and also the beginning of Wessex domination over all of Britain.

The following excerpt, from the entry for 878 A.D. in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, describes Alfred the Great's defeat of Guthrum, the Viking king.

878 In this year in midwinter after twelfth night the enemy army came stealthily to Chippenham, and occupied the land of the West Saxons and settled there, and drove a great part of the people across the sea, and conquered most of the

others; and the people submitted to them, except King Alfred. He journeyed in difficulties through the woods and fenfastnesses with a small force.

And the same winter the brother of Ivar and Healfdene was in the kingdom of the West Saxons [in Devon], with 23 ships. And he was killed there and 840 men of his army with him. And there was captured the banner which they called "Raven."

And afterwards at Easter, King Alfred with a small force made a stronghold at Athelney, and he and the section of the people of Somerset which was nearest to it proceeded to fight from that stronghold against the enemy. Then in the seventh week after Easter he rode to "Egbert's stone" east of Selwood, and there came to meet him all the people of Somerset and of Wiltshire and of that part of Hampshire which was on this side of the sea, and they rejoiced to see him. And then after one night he went from that encampment to Iley, and after another night to Edington, and there fought against the whole army and put it to flight, and pursued it as far as the fortress, and stayed there a fortnight. And then the enemy gave him preliminary hostages and great oaths that they would leave his kingdom, and promised also that their king should receive baptism, and they kept their promise.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is an early record in Old English of events from the beginning of the Christian era to 1154. Surviving in seven manuscripts, the early entries are sporadic and short—often a single line per year—but later entries include fascinating historical anecdotes and some lyrical entries such as the present poem. Alfred the Great is credited with demanding more organization and detail of the

chronicle.

The following excerpt, from the entry for 449 A.D. in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, describes the invitation to the Angles and Saxons by Vortigern, the legendary fifth-century king of Celtic Britain.

449 In this year Mauritius and Valentinus succeeded to the throne and ruled for seven years. And in their days Vortigern invited the English hither, and then came in three ships to Britain at the place Ebbs-fleet. King Vortigern gave them land in the south-east of this land on condition that they should fight against the Picts. They then fought against the Picts and had the victory wherever they came. They then sent to Angeln, bidding them send more help, and had them informed of the cowardice of the Britons and the excellence of the land. They then immediately sent hither a greater force to the help of the others. Those men came from three tribes of Germany; from the Old Saxons, from the Angles, from the Jutes. From the Jutes came the people of Kent and of the Isle of Wight, namely the tribe which now inhabits the Isle of Wight and that race in Wessex which is still called the race of the Jutes. From the Old Saxons came the East Saxons, the South Saxons, and the West Saxons. From Angeln, which ever after remained waste, between the Jutes and the Saxons, came the East Angles, the Middle Angles, the Mercians, and all the Northumbrians. Their leaders were two brothers, Hengest and Horsa, who were sons of Wihtgils. Wihtgils was the son of Witta, the son of Wecta, the son of Woden. From that Woden has descended all our royal family, and that of the Southumbrians also.

Timeline

400

Withdrawal of Roman forces (410)

Anglo-Saxon Settlement begins (c. 449)

500

Legendary King Arthur (a Celt) battles the migrating Anglo-Saxons

600

Conversion of Kent to Christianity (597)

Conversion of Northumbria (625)

Sutton Hoo ship burial (635)

700

Caedmon's Hymn written

Danish raids begin (787)

800

Viking raids on east coast (c. 865)

Alfred the Great rules Wessex (871-99)

Dane-law established (886)

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle begun

900

Eadwearde rules Wessex (899-924)

Aethelstan (924-40) unifies England

Battle of Brunanburh is won (and enshrined in verse)

1000

Norman Conquest (1066)

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*An Anglo-Saxon Riddle
to close this text*

An enemy ended my life, deprived me of my physical strength; then he dipped me in water and drew me out again, and put me in the sun where I soon shed all my hair. After that, the knife's sharp edge bit into me and all my blemishes were scraped away; fingers folded me and the bird's feather often moved over my brown surface, sprinkling meaningful marks; it swallowed more wood-dye (part of the stream) and again travelled over me leaving black tracks. Then a man bound me, he stretched skin over me and adorned me with gold; thus I am enriched by the wondrous work of smiths, wound about with shining metal. Now my clasp and my red dye and these glorious adornments bring fame far and wide to the Protector of Men, and not to the pains of hell. If only the sons of men would make use of me they would be the safer and the more victorious, their hearts would be bolder, their minds more at ease, their thoughts wiser; and they would have more friends, companions and kinsmen (courageous, honourable, trusty, kind) who would gladly increase their honour and prosperity, and heap benefits upon them, ever holding them most dear. Ask what I am called, of such use to men. My name is famous, of service to men and sacred in itself.

Notes

