

PECULIARITIES OF OLD ENGLISH TEXTS**Glebov Konstantin Andreevich**

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The written language of Old English was based on runes. In the early 8th century, runic symbols were replaced by a simplified version of the Latin alphabet under the influence of Christian missionaries from Ireland. Much of the literature of the period was written in the early West Saxon dialect. Its later version, considered by linguists to be the classical form of Old English, was used in the creation of the epic poem *Beowulf*. The author of this work remains unidentified.

Cadmon's Hymn is the first work in Old English to survive to the present day. The author of the text is believed to be the poet Caedmon, who lived in the 6th century. Christian and pagan motifs are intricately intertwined in the hymn. The oldest manuscript with the verse dates back to 737.

The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who invaded Britain in the 5th and 6th centuries brought with them the common Germanic metre; but of their earliest oral poetry, probably used for panegyric, magic, and short narrative, little or none survives. For nearly a century after the conversion of King Aethelberht I of Kent to Christianity about 600, there is no evidence that the English wrote poetry in their own language. But St. Bede the Venerable, in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* (“Ecclesiastical History of the English People”), wrote that in the late 7th century Caedmon, an illiterate Northumbrian cowherd, was inspired in a dream to compose a short hymn in praise of the creation. Caedmon later composed verses based on Scripture, which was expounded for him by monks at Streaneshalch (now called Whitby), but only the “Hymn of Creation” survives. Caedmon legitimized the native verse form by adapting it to Christian themes. Others, following his example, gave England a body of vernacular poetry unparalleled in Europe before the end of the 1st millennium.

Most Old English poetry is preserved in four manuscripts of the late 10th and early 11th centuries. The *Beowulf* manuscript (British Library) contains *Beowulf*, *Judith*, and three prose tracts; the Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral) is a miscellaneous gathering of lyrics, riddles, didactic poems, and religious narratives; the Junius Manuscript (Bodleian Library, Oxford)—also called the Caedmon Manuscript, even though its contents are no longer attributed to Caedmon—contains biblical paraphrases; and the Vercelli Book (found in the cathedral library in Vercelli, Italy) contains saints’ lives, several short religious poems, and prose homilies. In addition to the poems in these books are historical poems in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; poetic renderings of Psalms 51–150; the 31 “Metres” included in King Alfred the Great’s translation of Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae* (*Consolation of Philosophy*); magical, didactic, elegiac, and heroic poems; and others, miscellaneous interspersed with prose, jotted in margins, and even worked in stone or metal.[1]

Few poems can be dated as closely as Caedmon’s “Hymn.” King Alfred’s compositions fall into the late 9th century, and Bede composed his “Death Song” within 50 days of his death on May 25, 735. Historical poems such as “The Battle of Brunanburh” (after 937) and “The Battle of Maldon” (after 991) are fixed by the dates of the events they commemorate. A translation of one of Aldhelm’s riddles is found not only in the Exeter Book but also in an early 9th-century manuscript at Leiden, Neth. And at least a part of “The Dream of the Rood” can be dated by an excerpt carved on the 8th-century Ruthwell Cross (in Dumfriesshire, Scot.). But in the absence of such indications, Old English poems are hard to date, and the scholarly consensus that most were composed in the Midlands and the North in the 8th and 9th centuries gave way to uncertainty

during the last two decades of the 20th century. [1]

Many now hold that "The Wanderer," Beowulf, and other poems once assumed to have been written in the 8th century are of the 9th century or later. For most poems, there is no scholarly consensus beyond the belief that they were written between the 8th and the 11th centuries.

If few poems can be dated accurately, still fewer can be attributed to particular poets. The most important author from whom a considerable body of work survives is Cynewulf, who wove his runic signature into the epilogues of four poems. Aside from his name, little is known of him; he probably lived in the 9th century in Mercia or Northumbria. His works include *The Fates of the Apostles*, a short martyrology; *The Ascension* (also called *Christ II*), a homily and biblical narrative; *Juliana*, a saint's passion set in the reign of the Roman emperor Maximian (late 3rd century CE); and *Elene*, perhaps the best of his poems, which describes the mission of St. Helena, mother of the emperor Constantine, to recover Christ's cross. Cynewulf's work is lucid and technically elegant; his theme is the continuing evangelical mission from the time of Christ to the triumph of Christianity under Constantine. Several poems not by Cynewulf are associated with him because of their subject matter. These include two lives of St. Guthlac and Andreas; the latter, the apocryphal story of how St. Andrew fell into the hands of the cannibalistic (and presumably mythical) Mermedonians, has stylistic affinities with Beowulf. Also in the "Cynewulf group" are several poems with Christ as their subject, of which the most important is "The Dream of the Rood," in which the cross speaks of itself as Christ's loyal thane and yet the instrument of his death. This tragic paradox echoes a recurring theme of secular poetry and at the same time movingly expresses the religious paradoxes of Christ's triumph in death and humankind's redemption from sin.

Several poems of the Junius Manuscript are based on the Old Testament narratives Genesis, Exodus, and Daniel. Of these, Exodus is remarkable for its intricate diction and bold imagery. The fragmentary Judith of the Beowulf Manuscript stirringly embellishes the story from the Apocrypha of the heroine who led the Jews to victory over the Assyrians.[2]

The term elegy is used of Old English poems that lament the loss of worldly goods, glory, or human companionship. "The Wanderer" is narrated by a man, deprived of lord and kinsmen, whose journeys lead him to the realization that there is stability only in heaven. "The Seafarer" is similar, but its journey motif more explicitly symbolizes the speaker's spiritual yearnings. Several others have similar themes, and three elegies—"The Husband's Message," "The Wife's Lament," and "Wulf and Eadwacer"—describe what appears to be a conventional situation: the separation of husband and wife by the husband's exile.

"Deor" bridges the gap between the elegy and the heroic poem, for in it a poet laments the loss of his position at court by alluding to sorrowful stories from Germanic legend. Beowulf itself narrates the battles of Beowulf, a prince of the Geats (a tribe in what is now southern Sweden), against the monstrous Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a fire-breathing dragon. The account contains some of the best elegiac verse in the language, and, by setting marvelous tales against a historical background in which victory is always temporary and strife is always renewed, the poet gives the whole an elegiac cast. Beowulf also is one of the best religious poems, not only because of its explicitly Christian passages but also because Beowulf's monstrous foes are depicted as God's enemies and Beowulf himself as God's champion. Other heroic narratives are fragmentary. Of "The Battle of Finnsburh" and "Waldere" only enough remains to indicate that, when whole, they must have been fast-paced and stirring.

Of several poems dealing with English history and preserved in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the most notable is "The Battle of Brunanburh," a panegyric on the occasion of King Athelstan's victory over a coalition of Norsemen and Scots in 937. But the best historical poem is not from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. "The Battle of Maldon," which describes the defeat of Aldorman Byrhtnoth and much of his army at the hands of Viking invaders in 991, discovers in defeat an occasion to celebrate the heroic ideal, contrasting the determination of many of Byrhtnoth's thanes to avenge his death or die in the attempt with the cowardice of others who left the field. Minor poetic genres include catalogs (two sets of "Maxims" and "Widsith," a list of

rulers, tribes, and notables in the heroic age), dialogues, metrical prefaces and epilogues to prose works of the Alfredian period, and liturgical poems associated with the Benedictine Office.

The earliest English prose work, the law code of King Aethelberht I of Kent, was written within a few years of the arrival in England (597) of St. Augustine of Canterbury. Other 7th- and 8th-century prose, similarly practical in character, includes more laws, wills, and charters. According to Cuthbert, who was a monk at Jarrow, Bede at the time of his death had just finished a translation of the Gospel of St. John, though this does not survive.[3] Two medical tracts, *Herbarium* and *Medicina de quadrupedibus*, very likely date from the 8th century.

The earliest literary prose dates from the late 9th century, when King Alfred, eager to improve the state of English learning, led a vigorous program to translate into English "certain books that are necessary for all men to know." Alfred himself translated the *Pastoral Care* of St. Gregory I the Great, the *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius, the *Soliloquies* of St. Augustine of Hippo, and the first 50 Psalms. His *Pastoral Care* is a fairly literal translation, but his *Boethius* is extensively restructured and revised to make explicit the Christian message that medieval commentators saw in that work. He revised the *Soliloquies* even more radically, departing from his source to draw from Gregory and St. Jerome, as well as from other works by Augustine. Alfred's prefaces to these works are of great historical interest.

At Alfred's urging, Bishop Werferth of Worcester translated the *Dialogues* of Gregory; probably Alfred also inspired anonymous scholars to translate Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* and Paulus Orosius's *Historiarum adversum paganos libri vii* (*Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*). Both of these works are much abridged; the Bede translation follows its source slavishly, but the translator of Orosius added many details of northern European geography and also accounts of the voyages of Ohthere the Norwegian and Wulfstan the Dane. These accounts, in addition to their geographical interest, show that friendly commerce between England and Scandinavia was possible even during the Danish wars. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* probably originated in Alfred's reign. Its earliest annals (beginning in the reign of Julius Caesar) are laconic, except the entry for 755, which records in detail a feud between the West Saxon king Cynewulf and the would-be usurper Cyneheard. The entries covering the Danish wars of the late 9th century are much fuller, and those running from the reign of Ethelred II to the Norman Conquest in 1066 (when the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* exists in several versions) contain many passages of excellent writing. The early 10th century is not notable for literary production, but some of the homilies in the *Vercelli Book* and the *Blickling Manuscript* (Scheide Library, Princeton University) may belong to that period.

Beowulf belongs metrically, stylistically, and thematically to a heroic tradition grounded in Germanic religion and mythology. It is also part of the broader tradition of heroic poetry. Many incidents, such as the tearing-off of the monster's arm and the hero's descent into the mere, are familiar motifs from folklore. The ethical values are manifestly the Germanic code of loyalty to chief and tribe and vengeance to enemies. Yet the poem is so infused with a Christian spirit that it lacks the grim fatality of many of the Eddaic lays or the sagas of Icelandic literature. *Beowulf* himself seems more altruistic than other Germanic heroes or the ancient Greek heroes of the *Iliad*. It is significant that his three battles are not against men, which would entail the retaliation of the blood feud, but against evil monsters, enemies of the whole community and of civilization itself. Many critics have seen the poem as a Christian allegory in which *Beowulf*, the champion of goodness and light, fights the forces of evil and darkness. His sacrificial death is seen not as tragic but as befitting the end of a good (some would say "too good") hero's life.

That is not to say that *Beowulf* is an optimistic poem. English writer and Old English scholar J.R.R. Tolkien suggested that its total effect is more like a long lyrical elegy than an epic. Even the earlier, happier section in Denmark is filled with ominous references that would have been well understood by contemporary audiences.[4] Thus, after Grendel's death, King Hrothgar speaks sanguinely of the future, which the audience would know will end with the destruction of his line and the burning of Heorot. In the second part the movement is slow and funereal: scenes from *Beowulf*'s youth are replayed in a minor key as a counterpoint to his last battle, and the mood becomes increasingly sombre as the *wyrd* (fate) that comes to all men closes in on him.

However, in its extant form, the poem about Beowulf has already deviated considerably from this presumed basis and, according to all the data, indicates not one, but several stages of its literary processing. In the extant version of the poem bears the traces of rather significant changes of a Christian scribe, who threw out the names of pagan gods and too obvious allusions to Germanic mythology, and also made a number of insertions, easily distinguishable in a work that has a generally pre-Christian character. This editor of the poem calls Grendel a descendant of Cain, sea monsters - the devils of hell, regrets the paganism of the Danish king; in various places of the poem mention the names of Abel, Noah, the biblical legend of the flood, etc. Even Beowulf himself is transformed into a kind of Christian saint, a snake fighter who sacrifices his life in order to rid the country of the fire-breathing dragon, and utters purely Christian instructions. The intervention of the same scribe should explain some of the features of the closeness of "Beowulf" to ancient literature (for example, Virgil's "Aeneid").[5]

The poem is distinguished by a very refined literary technique. Like all works of Anglo-Saxon poetry, it is written in Old Germanic alliterative verse, characterized, however, by a special sophistication and an abundance of book-poetic devices (stringing synonyms, metaphors, indirect speech instead of direct speech, etc.).

The poet also makes use of a stylistic device called "kenning", a method of naming a person or thing by using a phrase that signified a quality of that person or thing (e.g. a warrior might be described as "the helmet-bearing one"). Another characteristic of the poet's style is his use of litotes, a form of understatement, often with negative overtones, which is intended to create a sense of irony. Most often the characters just deliver speeches to one another, and there are no real conversations as such. However, the story is kept moving quickly by leaping from one event to another. There is some use of historical digressions, similar to the use of flashbacks in modern movies and novels, and this interweaving of events of the present and the past is a major structural device. The poet also sometimes shifts the point of view in the midst of an action in order to offer multiple perspectives (for example, to show the reactions of the warriors who are looking on as an audience in almost every battle).

List of sources used

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