

BRITISH LITERATURE

Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century and Neoclassicism

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ANGLO-SAXON LITERATURE

1.4 THE DREAM OF THE ROOD

Author unknown

Approximately seventh to eighth century

The Dream of the Rood dates from at least the early eighth century, when eighteen verses of it were carved on the Ruthwell Cross in runic letters. The Ruthwell Cross, in southern Scotland, stands over eighteen feet tall and includes Gospel scenes, Latin inscriptions, and elaborately-carved vines in addition to the fragment of *The Dream of the Rood*. Like other Anglo-Saxon poems, *The Dream of the Rood* uses alliteration rather than rhyme; it is divided into half-lines (with a pause, or caesura, in the middle) that vary between short rhythmic sections and longer hypermetrical sections (with more syllables). The 156 lines of the complete poem are found in the tenth century Vercelli Book, a manuscript rediscovered in 1822, in the cathedral in Vercelli, in northern Italy. Just as the Ruthwell Cross

is meant to appeal to a variety of audiences, the poem presents a Christian subject (the Crucifixion) in a way that would appeal to the traditions of a warrior class only recently converted to Christianity in some cases. Warriors followed a lord (who could be a king or a chieftain), who distributed gold and other rewards to loyal retainers. When the Rood (Cross) speaks of its history, from tree to loyal retainer of Christ (his liege lord/Lord), it describes Christ as a warrior who climbs up onto the cross freely and bravely to defeat sin. An Anglo-Saxon audience could not help but see a comparison to Odin/Woden sacrificing himself on the Tree of Life (Yggdrasil) to gain the secret of the runes, the very language in which the fragment is written. The poem is also a dream vision, a popular genre in medieval English literature (see, for example, Chaucer's *Parlement of Fowles*, found in this anthology). When the dreamer awakes, he longs to rejoin his companions, who have gone on to feast at the Lord's table in heaven: a situation similar to that found in the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Wanderer* (also in the anthology). Near the end, the dreamer refers to Christ saving those who "suffered the burning," an indirect reference to the popular *Harrowing of Hell*, found in the (now) apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* and in numerous medieval works, from mystery plays to Dante's



Image 1.3 | The Ruthwell Cross

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Divine Comedy. In it, Christ descends to Hell after the Crucifixion, breaks open the gate, scatters the demons, and frees all the righteous souls, leading them to heaven. The reference survives to the present day in the Apostle's Creed, which states that Christ "descended into hell" (or in some recent versions "descended to the dead"). The poem therefore celebrates Christ's victories in battle, eschewing the later medieval focus on Christ's suffering and image as the lamb of God.

1.4.1 **The Dream of the Rood**

Lo! choicest of dreams I will relate,
 What dream I dreamt in middle of night
 When mortal men reposed in rest.
 Methought I saw a wondrous wood
 Tower aloft with light bewound,
 Brightest of trees; that beacon was all
 Begirt with gold; jewels were standing
 Four at surface of earth, likewise were there five
 Above on the shoulder-brace. All angels of God beheld it,
 Fair through future ages; 'twas no criminal's cross indeed,

But holy spirits beheld it there,
 Men upon earth, all this glorious creation.
 Strange was that victor-tree, and stained with sins was I,
 With foulness defiled. I saw the glorious tree
 With vesture adorned winsomely shine,

Begirt with gold; bright gems had there
 Worthily decked the tree of the Lord.
 Yet through that gold I might perceive
 Old strife of the wretched, that first it gave
 Blood on the stronger [right] side. With sorrows was I oppressed,
 Afraid for that fair sight; I saw the ready beacon
 Change in vesture and hue; at times with moisture covered,
 Soiled with course of blood; at times with treasure adorned.
 Yet lying there a longer while,
 Beheld I sad the Saviour's tree

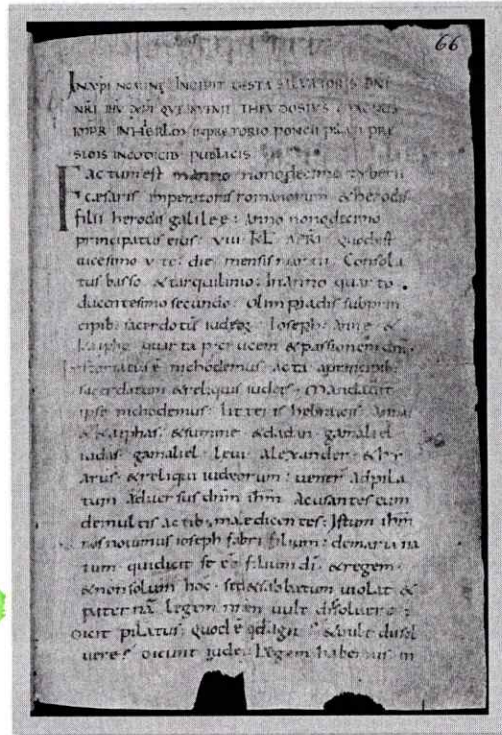


Image 1.4 | The Gospel of Nicodemus

Artist | Nicodemus

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Until I heard that words it uttered;
 The best of woods gan speak these words:
 "Twas long ago (I remember it still)
 That I was hewn at end of a grove,
 Stripped from off my stem; strong foes laid hold of me there,
 Wrought for themselves a show, bade felons raise me up;
 Men bore me on their shoulders, till on a mount they set me;
 Fiends many fixed me there. Then saw I mankind's Lord
 Hasten with mickle might, for He would sty upon me.
 There durst I not 'gainst word of the Lord
 Bow down or break, when saw I tremble
 The surface of earth; I might then all
 My foes have felled, yet fast I stood.
 The Hero young begirt Himself, Almighty God was He,
 Strong and stern of mind; He stied on the gallows high,
 Bold in sight of many, for man He would redeem.
 I shook when the Hero clasped me, yet durst not bow to earth,
 Fall to surface of earth, but firm I must there stand.
 A rood was I upreared; I raised the mighty King,
 The Lord of Heaven; I durst not bend me.
 They drove their dark nails through me; the wounds are seen upon me,
 The open gashes of guile; I durst harm none of them.
 They mocked us both together; all moistened with blood was I,
 Shed from side of the man, when forth He sent His spirit.
 Many have I on that mount endured
 Of cruel fates; I saw the Lord of Hosts
 Strongly outstretched; darkness had then
 Covered with clouds the corse of the Lord,
 The brilliant brightness; the shadow continued,
 Wan 'neath the welkin. There wept all creation,
 Bewailed the King's death; Christ was on the cross.
 Yet hastening thither they came from afar
 To the Son of the King; that all I beheld.
 Sorely with sorrows was I oppressed; yet I bowed 'neath the hands of men,
 Lowly with mickle might. Took they there Almighty God,
 Him raised from the heavy torture; the battle-warriors left me
 To stand bedrenched with blood; all wounded with darts was I.
 There laid they the weary of limb, at head of His corse they stood,
 Beheld the Lord of Heaven, and He rested Him there awhile,
 Worn from the mickle war. Began they an earth-house to work,
 Men in the murderers' sight, carved it of brightest stone,
 Placed therein victories' Lord. Began sad songs to sing
 The wretched at eventide; then would they back return

Mourning from the mighty prince; all lonely rested He there.
 Yet weeping we then a longer while
 Stood at our station: the [voice] arose
 Of battle-warriors; the corse grew cold,
 Fair house of life. Then one gan fell.
 Us all to earth; 'twas a fearful fate!
 One buried us in deep pit, yet of me the thanes of the Lord,
 His friends, heard tell; [from earth they raised me],
 And me begirt with gold and silver.
 Now thou mayst hear, my dearest man,
 That bale of woes have I endured,
 Of sorrows sore. Now the time is come,
 That me shall honor both far and wide
 Men upon earth, and all this mighty creation
 Will pray to this beacon. On me God's Son
 Suffered awhile; so glorious now
 I tower to Heaven, and I may heal
 Each one of those who reverence me;
 Of old I became the hardest of pains,
 Most loathsome to ledes [nations], the way of life,
 Right way, I prepared for mortal men.
 Lo! the Lord of Glory honored me then
 Above the grove, the guardian of Heaven,
 As He His mother, even Mary herself,
 Almighty God before all men
 Worthily honored above all women.
 Now thee I bid, my dearest man,
 That thou this sight shalt say to men,
 Reveal in words, 'tis the tree of glory,
 On which once suffered Almighty God
 For the many sins of all mankind,
 And also for Adam's misdeeds of old.
 Death tasted He there; yet the Lord arose
 With His mickle might for help to men.
 Then stied He to Heaven; again shall come
 Upon this mid-earth to seek mankind
 At the day of doom the Lord Himself,
 Almighty God, and His angels with Him;
 Then He will judge, who hath right of doom,
 Each one of men as here before
 In this vain life he hath deserved.
 †No one may there be free from fear
 In view of the word that the Judge will speak.

He will ask 'fore the crowd, where is the man
Who for name of the Lord would bitter death
Be willing to taste, as He did on the tree.
But then they will fear, and few will bethink them
What they to Christ may venture to say.
Then need there no one be filled with fear
Who bears in his breast the best of beacons;
But through the rood a kingdom shall seek
From earthly way each single soul
That with the Lord thinketh to dwell.”
Then I prayed to the tree with joyous heart,
With mickle might, when I was alone
With small attendance; the thought of my mind
For the journey was ready; I've lived through many
Hours of longing. Now 'tis hope of my life
That the victory-tree I am able to seek,
Oftener than all men I alone may
Honor it well; my will to that
Is mickle in mind, and my plea for protection
To the rood is directed. I've not many mighty
Of friends on earth; but hence went they forth
From joys of the world, sought glory's King;
Now live they in Heaven with the Father on high,
In glory dwell, and I hope for myself
On every day when the rood of the Lord,
Which here on earth before I viewed,
In this vain life may fetch me away
And bring me then, where bliss is mickle,
Joy in the Heavens, where the folk of the Lord
Is set at the feast, where bliss is eternal;
And may He then set me where I may hereafter
In glory dwell, and well with the saints
Of joy partake. May the Lord be my friend,
Who here on earth suffered before
On the gallows-tree for the sins of man!
He us redeemed, and gave to us life,
A heavenly home. Hope was renewed,
With blessing and bliss, for the sufferers of burning.
The Son was victorious on that fateful journey,
Mighty and happy, when He came with a many,
With a band of spirits to the kingdom of God,
The Ruler Almighty, for joy to the angels
And to all the saints, who in Heaven before

In glory dwelt; when their Ruler came,
Almighty God, where was His home.

1.4.2 Reading and Review Questions

1. In what ways is the Rood a loyal retainer of Christ? How does he not betray his lord/Lord, despite the circumstances?
2. How much does the Dreamer seem to identify with the Rood, and how much does he seem to identify with the "hero?"
3. Which passages of the poem could be used in any Anglo-Saxon heroic poem, and which are specifically religious? Why?
4. How does the image in this poem of Christ on the cross compare to depictions of Odin hanging on Yggdrasil in Norse mythology? Compare how each one is described and what each one accomplishes.
5. Do the last three lines of the poem go off-topic in a small way? Why or why not?

1.5 BEOWULF

Author unknown

Manuscript from around 1000 ACE (from an earlier oral story)

Beowulf survives in a single manuscript that was burned around the edges in a fire in 1741; without it, the story of the hero of the Geats would have been lost to history. It is impossible to know how long the oral story was in circulation before it was written down. The British manuscript is written mostly in a West Saxon dialect of Anglo-Saxon/Old English, although the main actions of the story take place in what would be modern-day Denmark and Sweden (see map). Saxon lands were just south of that area, in modern-day northern Germany, so when the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes invaded Britain, leading to the creation of Angleland, or England, they brought with them stories of their previous homelands. There are some real

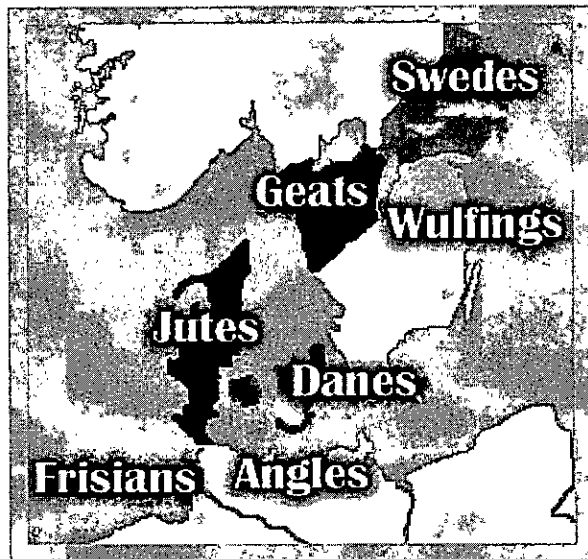


Image 1.5 | Beowulf Geography Map

Artist | User "Wiglaf"

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