

Ebandun: An Epic Poem in Twelve Parts (Bk II)

by [William G. Carpenter](#) (July 2021)



"That's no longer a prudent course, good husband."

II. Enemy Courts

The scene turns to the Danes. Halga says farewell to his Frankish concubine. In his speech to the army at Cirencester, Guthrum assigns the earls their roles in the invasion and prays for victory in the name of his slain son. Back in Chippenham, Alfred celebrates Epiphany. After giving thanks for the Lord's protection, he warns his compatriots of a likely attack, which begins.

Now tell us, Ghost, of the cold, seaborne Danes,
your children, out of Noah, like ourselves.
You gave them breath and places on the earth
from which to brave the bird-nurturing waves.
You gave them sun and moon and heaven's weather
so they might know their Maker cares for them^[1]
and seek him out with overflowing hearts.
And though their kings claim Woden as their forebear,
as ours who stem from Father Cerdic do,
you delegated captains from your host
(not just the fallen ones, as some have grumbled)
to train them in the ways of peace and war
and lead them, in good time, into your kingdom.

In Roman Cirencester, beside the Churn,^[2]
Caer Ceri to the Welsh, where three roads meet,
beneath a Hwiccan noble's frozen thatch,
good Halga, Eric's nephew, Hemming's seed,
attempted to console his Frankish girl
for staying put while he campaigned with Gorm.^[3]
Riding without camp followers or baggage,
they planned to fall like lightning on the foe,
and she was now in no fit state to gallop.
Halga therefore said to thickening Ymme,

“I’ll send for you before your childbed.
But if I don’t, this purse of gold dinars
will underwrite your place among the Danes.
I bought a heifer we shall offer Freya
and masses for the saints you specified,
Elizabeth and John and holy Mary.
My lands I leave to my surviving young,
but while you live, you’ll share the fruits thereof.
So eat your fill of eggs and cream, my dear,
and steer clear of Hwiccan cunning men.”

Kneeling, Ymme poured warm streams of tears
on Halga’s callused palms and rubbed her cheek,
her sodden cheek, against his knucklebones.
“May the good Lord,” she murmured, “shield my lord—”

Good Halga pulled her up. A gem she was,
a slaughtered burgher’s daughter Gorm had bought
for thirty solidi in Colchester—[\[4\]](#)
she might have fetched ten times that much in Spain.
If Hemming’s scion lived, he might yet win
a royal Anglian or Saxon dame
or one of King Sigfred’s landed nieces
or a gilt princess sprung from Karli’s loins,
but for the time this virgin and her child
would ease the tedium of camp and teach
a northern lord to govern Christian nations.

“May the Lord speed our scheme,” Lord Halga countered.
“If we succeed, this lamb will be a great one
in the land, mastering the fat Saxon nobs.
Now dry your chin,” he said, wiping his eyes.

“And I may be a queen someday,” she added,
“like Saint Baldhild, the thrall who ruled the Franks.” [\[5\]](#)

Below, where worried Hwiccan waited on him,
with hand as hard as iron tongs that clamp

the hot work aglow in the forge's maw,
bold Halga gripped the shoulder of his host.

"Pamper my Imi, Mercian," Halga said,
"or Earl Hrut's sons will flay you alive."
The Frankess frowned to show that she concurred
in the fierce menace uttered by the sailor.



A moot or pack or fellowship of earls
awaited Hemming's grandson in the street.
Lord Hrut of Hedeby was first to hail him:
it was Hrut who'd first approached the kings [\[6\]](#)
to vouch for exiled Gorm's benign intent
in gathering men and ships to pillage Britain.
The earl's gray wolf cloak revealed a jacket
of watered leaf-green silk; atop his brows
his bald crown blazed like a baby's bottom.

Next in rank (not counting Gorm) came Wiga,
a noble Ringsted man the kings had sent
with twenty crews of mailed Zealanders.
His ancestors had fought at Bravellir,
where the best men of the era stress-tested
War-tooth's overlordship of the north. [\[7\]](#)
His silken coat or vest, of Grecian make,
glowed like a bank of daffodils in spring
beneath his glossy black marten cope.

Beside him lingered Siward, Smala's son,
a Scanian from Lund who'd raised ten crews
of fishermen and husbandmen who'd never
pulled an oar for any raiding chieftain.
Both man and woman, thrall and thane esteemed
Lord Siward's kindness and sense of justice.
His otter cape revealed a tunic dyed
the welling blue of the All-Father's pallium.

Behind him, Wan, from Limfjord's northern shore,
rested his famous axe against his thigh.[\[8\]](#)
Of East Frankish work, enchased with silver,
that gift from Ingwar had delivered Grim's
eagle from Aella's and Saint Edmund's backs.[\[9\]](#)
His crews included one of true berserkers,
captained by Attila, his fastest friend.
The rough pelt of a bear engrossed his form,[\[10\]](#)
brushing his hips and knees with its hooked claws.

Next, there came two enterprising earls
Gorm had enrolled from the stripped Frankish towns:
Lord Froda, with six western companies—
his seal coat concealed a purple shirt—
and Toca, Toca's son, of Himmerland,
who led five crews of veterans from Orbaek.
The Himmerlanders claimed to be the first—
under the Cimbrian name, which Caesar mentions—[\[11\]](#)
the first far northerners to challenge Rome.
His copper locks still burned with summer's fire
above a cape patched up of hare and stoat.

The gang of chiefs included Theodric,
Gormr's Nordalbingian Saxon ally,
who'd fought with him in Eric's thrust at Eric,
the son of Hemming versus Godfred's son,
and Nyklot, Halga's Abotritan friend.
The Abotrites abhorred their northern neighbors.

Surrounded by his earls, Godfred's grandson,
their *dux bellorum* and their acting king,
who traced his parentage to royal Dan,
whom the Danes first raised on the shield at Viborg,
displayed a grin amid his salted beard,
a shred of breath drifting across his features
as tenuous as whispered prayers to Grim.
His sable mantle marked his shoulders' strength,
his scarlet tunic flamed with heartfelt fire,

and links of reddish gold flared on his chest,
outglistening the morning's muffled light.

Old Gorm had wrested tribute from young Alfred
despite the ruin of his fleet off Swanage; [\[12\]](#)
he'd slipped a leaguered army out of Wareham, [\[13\]](#)
leaving his only son in Saxon hands;
he'd shared in Halfdan's victories at Repton [\[14\]](#)
and Wilton, where they'd routed Alfred's host; [\[15\]](#)
he'd piloted three covered longships north,
beyond where fur-clad Finns and Terfinns dwell,
through the White Sea to cold Beormaland;
but none of his achievements blared so loud
in northern ears as when, to avenge his father,
while fighting beside the above-referenced Eric,
he cut down Eric his father-brother, [\[16\]](#)
who'd long ruled the Danes with a rod of iron.
No matter what adventures he confronted,
what lands and fame he racked up for his crews,
the world accounted Godrum Eric's bane,
the killer of his own royal uncle.

The earls' women followed close behind,
of Danish, Anglian, and Jutish blood,
their open capes exposing polished gauds.
All greeted Halga, Hemming's seed, and Ymme,
the images of Freya and her twin.
The party then proceeded towards the church.
"A splendid day for raiding," Gormr said.
"The earth is iron," Earl Hrut confirmed.
But Halga walked in silence by his thrall [\[17\]](#)
along the empty stalls that lined the street.
"Long years it is since I fathered a child," [\[18\]](#)
the seed of Dan conceded carelessly. [\[19\]](#)

Stopping by another timbered lodgment,
the king sent Wan to summon Halga's son,
Hrothulf, an able captain and tactician.

The earl found the hero with his handmaids
adjusting his immoderate fox-fur wrap.
“Dear ladies, as I’ll call you from now on,”[\[20\]](#)
young Hrothulf prophesied to Night and Day,
the names he gave his Irish concubines,
“soon you shall outrank the Saxon queen,
and though you never shall be more than slaves,
you’ll have Saxon slaves to do your bidding,
as shall your children and your children’s children.”

The newly minted damsels seized his hands
and pressed them roughly to their anxious lips.
“But don’t go fooling with Hrut’s handsome sons,
and steer clear of the slinking Hwiccan swains,”
King Hemming’s glaring great-grandson warned,
“and do not mock our army’s watchful gods,
or you shall lose those childish ears and noses
and earn your bread cavorting in a hedge.”
Contented with his rigor, Hrothulf thought
of Huneric the Vandal’s Gothic bride,[\[21\]](#)
sent home from Vandal Africa, thus maimed.

The girls, recoiling as if stung, let fall
the foreign prince’s ring-encrusted fingers.
He laughed and turned to follow Earl Wan,
whose raven crown protruded from the floor.
“Come, women,” Hrothulf ordered with a smile.[\[22\]](#)
They watched the gorgeous bunches of his cloak
glide opulently through the open hatchway.

The earls and their consorts welcomed Hrothulf
with zeal aimed to please a would-be king.
The Limfjord earl asked his foster-son,[\[23\]](#)
“What will you call the whelps of Day and Night?”
“I think I’ll call them Dusk and Dawn,” he said,
“though men will just say, ‘Hey, slave,’ if we fail.”

Hearing a steersman’s summons roil the air

above the smoke and murmur of the camp,
the men set down their whetstones and their combs
and left the Roman theater to fill
the forum facing John the Baptist's church.
They now saw old Gormr mount the doorstep,
his arms in hand, his earls at his heels.
Resoundingly, the rowers cheered the lord
who'd guided them to signal victories
in three ferocious trials with their foes.[\[24\]](#)
The sailors knew it was their part to shout,
not clog their hearts with dread of ills to come,
and knew it was his part to stoke their ire,
not beg forgiveness for the miseries
they'd suffered circumscribed by native steel.

Now Godfred's grandson raised his implements.
An oxhide hung behind him on the door,
daubed with the rough outlines of the shires.
"My friends," cried Gorm, "tonight we call on Alfred,
the mean and fearful West Saxon queen."
The Danes guffawed, jeering a feckless foe.
"She robbed our coffers of the promised pence
after we plucked her first bloom at Wilton.
She broke the solemn vow she swore at Wareham,
murdering young men whose names you know.
She shirked on the indemnity agreed
for our restraint in sparing Exeter.
But faithlessness is not her foulest trait.
For we have seen, in battle and in parley,
the slut indulge her ignominious tricks.
She shakes her robe, and heroes grow confused.
She rubs her eye, and weapons lose their edge."

The pirates' laughter snapped, a crackling fire
kindled to clear a copse of trash and scrub.
They hooted the repugnant hag who soon
would sip the liquor of their searching swords,[\[25\]](#)

and as they hooted, purged their souls of pity.

Again their captain lifted axe and sword.
“Tonight the Saxons offer gifts,” he said,
“to mollify their baby deity.
Despite Queen Alfred’s meanness, I have brought
two kingly gifts, my servants, Hugh and Perry.
This awl was Offa’s token from King Karl,
who received it from the crushed Avar khan.
This wound-wolf, which I call my royal key,[\[26\]](#)
which wonderfully can open every chest,
this bone-beak Beorn carried at Seville,
at Luna, where Lord Haesten feigned his death—
we thought we’d conquered Rome, the queen of cities—
and Saracenic Alexandria.
The Saxon sow will grasp our argument
when we uncage the eagle in her back.”

The oarsmen roared. Their leader lowered his arms
and touched his sword-tip to the oxhide map.
“Lord Froda’s Ribe River men will ride[\[27\]](#)
the Roman road to virgin Glastonbury.
Siward, Smala’s son, and Earl Wiga,[\[28\]](#)
your crews will sweep southeast on Ermine Street.
I and Lord Halga and these heroes here[\[29\]](#)
will follow Froda’s force, then peel east.
Our envoy, Attila, has gone ahead
to spy a spot to spade—our lady’s low.”[\[30\]](#)

The pirates paused, then howled with hostile mirth.
“Cousins, fathers, sons,” said Godfred’s offspring,
“my boy, you know, was named for my good father,[\[31\]](#)
who ruled the Jutlanders with royal Harald.[\[32\]](#)
And as they galloped out with Godfred’s earls
to thrash the allies of almighty Karl—
no hard feelings, friends, that was long ago—
Harald hacked the backstraps of the Saxons
in every fight we fought in this fat land.”

Here murdered Godfred's grandson gulped to quell
his grief as other oarsmen dabbed their eyes—
so mutable are desperate men's emotions—
then cried, "When Harald joined our hostages,
he wished to learn the art of governing
the God-fearing West Saxon folk.
But when the Saxons broke the blood-sworn truce,
the sow herself opened our pledges' throats.[\[33\]](#)
Poor Harald perished in that shameful carnage,
the purple current staining his white chest
as when, in prayer, a cleric paints the pale
vellum with his slaughtered Savior's blood."

The chieftain peered intently at his men.
Beneath their weathered cheeks and welling grief
he saw the cost of the hard game they played,
staking their lives for acres and a hoard.
The greater number now had lost that wager.
He seemed to glimpse the dead thronged with the living,
as when half-elfin Scyld conjured a force
of corpses to depose her royal brother,[\[34\]](#)
or when, at Zulpich, where Frank butchered Frank
as Brunhild's grandsons' legions hacked each other,
so dense was the press, the dead stood unfallen.[\[35\]](#)
He glanced at Hrothulf studying his nails.

"I wish to send a message to my son,"[\[36\]](#)
said Gorm, "who now carouses with Lord Grim.
Will any man step up, or any woman?"
A chuckle burbled through the crowded square.
Two Hwiccans, bruised and bound, were brought before him.
"These ladies will," he said, waving his pommel.[\[37\]](#)
They stared as rags of mist spilled from their lips.
The grizzled sailor scanned the tent of cloud
and waited for the words to fill his throat.
"All-Father, called by fifty names," he cried,[\[38\]](#)
"who shaped the earth and planted souls in men;

red Thor, the giants' unwelcome guest; [\[39\]](#)
and you, three-headed Emperor, who threw [\[40\]](#)
the runes of war and granted us this isle,
whose rumpled downs will pasture our plump sheep;
whose fields, now slumbering under snow,
come summer will repay the laboring plowman;
whose gnarled apple trees will foam with blooms—
tonight we brave the weapon-storm to claim
this new earth Harald earned with his death.
O give us heart," he prayed, "thrice royal lords,
and give us honor of enameled steel!"

Then, steadying a Hwiccan's upraised crest,
he drew the whetted edge across his neck,
from which the spouting crimson pigment sprang.
He watched the spirit quit the victim's eyes
then turned to slit the second Hwiccan neck.
A second jet shot out, and drops congealed
and scattered on the steps like fleeing beads.
The freezing gore collected, pale and dull,
in shallow hollows many shoes had worn.

"Feast well," old Gormr heard his voice enjoin.
"This moonless night we'll rule the Saxon realm!"
Like man and wife, the spies lay side by side.
As the Dane bent to wipe his cutlery
on a drained traitor's soaked homespun shirt,
a qualm of loathing for his too-long life
strained against its shell with wrinkled wings.



That night in Alfred's hall at Chippenham
the Saxons feasted the Epiphany [\[41\]](#)
of our dear Lord, the Father's only Son,
whom officers commissioned to Judea
from newly reconciled Parthian lands
adored in the low cave where he was born.

Enrobed in smoke, the blackened rafters hummed
as gleemen chanted, struck the harp and tabor,
and blew their winsome flutes and quacking reeds.
The favored guests, displayed on Alfred's halfpace,
their gems and chains dispensing borrowed fire,
repelled the seeping chill of After-Yule
with breastworks of weasel, mink, and hare.
The flames of lamps and tallow candles shone
on beakers, bottles, bowls, and chalices
imbued with his creation's subtle hues
and trimmed with ribs and gouts and sober tears,
which Ealhswith and her companions filled
from Rhenish pitchers cradled in their arms.

To Alfred's left sat Abbot Herefrith,
the master of Britannic Glastonbury,
where Artorius sleeps, the Welshmen say;
next, the revered abbot and abbess of Frome,
a house founded by Aldhelm, Ini's cousin,
whom Ini called to the new see of Sherborne; [\[42\]](#)
then Aldhelm's eighth successor to that see,
Lord Athelheah, whom we saw hew the intruder;
then Alfstan, Dorset's *dux*