

# Ebandun: An Epic Poem in Twelve Parts (Bk IX)

## IX: The Flight into Athelney



*Through Adam's lapse, or by our Father's will,  
unceasing warfare is the lot of men,  
our place in life to seize and fight for land.*

by [William G. Carpenter](#) (February 2022)

*Alfred and company flee Chippenham. They bypass Bath, take refuge in a cave, and skirt the flooded moors surrounding Glastonbury. They reach Athelnoth's encampment on Easter morning. Under Alfred's leadership, the Saxons build a church and train in arms.*

Have mercy, Maker, on your chosen child  
and let your rainfall irrigate and thin  
the poisons coursing through his spirit-home.[\[1\]](#)  
Defend him as you shielded King Edwin  
from fever on his promise to convert  
when our Eomer needled him at Easter;[\[2\]](#)  
spare him as you spared Saint Benedict,  
whose envious brothers dosed the evening wine,  
by shattering their pitcher as it passed;[\[3\]](#)  
and fortify him as you toughened John,  
for whom the pagans poured a poisoned pot  
as once they served subversive Socrates.[\[4\]](#)  
Don't let him perish like his predecessor,  
West Saxon Beorhtric, who bibbed the brew  
his *ides*, Eadburh, King Offa's daughter,  
prepared for Worr, her husband's favorite hoard-guard.[\[5\]](#)  
She fled to Charles the Great, her father's friend,  
but spurning him in favor of his son[\[6\]](#)  
and irking him with her poor governance  
of the now-unknown nunnery he gave her,[\[7\]](#)  
she died alone, in poverty, in Pavia—  
where Liutprand entombed Augustine's bones.[\[8\]](#)

Veiled by falling rain and falling night,  
the company emerged from sodden woods  
and crossed a sodden field, yet unplowed.  
They forded Avon just above the mill,  
below the flooded claypits and the shops  
where potters wound and welded snakes of clay  
into bowls, beakers, pitchers, pots, and jars.

From there they headed west to Slaughterford,  
from which they straggled, via greasy tracks,  
up the hills that hedged West Saxon land.  
The rain had lifted and the moon had sunk, [\[9\]](#)  
uncurtaining the darkness to the west,  
when Beornwulf addressed young Athelgeofu,  
poor Ealhswith's and Alfred's second daughter.

"Yonder Dyrham lies," the hero said,  
"where Ceawlin and our pagan ancestors  
killed three Cymric kings and crushed their legions. [\[10\]](#)  
He planted Hwiccan folk from Bath to Gloucester."  
He paused, but Ingeld's scion added nothing.

"They were a Saxon clan," said Denewulf, [\[11\]](#)  
"but Mercian kings cut them off from their root.  
Now even their kings' names are lost to speech."

King Alfred turned his mare southwest and rode  
the Roman road by which, victorious,  
he'd trailed the sailors after Exeter. [\[12\]](#)  
He stopped at last beneath the ruined roof  
of an old Roman horseman's tiled mansion,  
since frequented by herdsman and their flocks. [\[13\]](#)  
The meager wing, including their worn steeds,  
crowded, a steaming mass, into a corner.

Next night, his flock refreshed—save Athelward,  
who wouldn't take his pap from Hilda's finger—  
the mood-sorrowing monarch marched his mare  
across the threshold into drenching gloom. [\[14\]](#)  
Shunning the town Minerva's waters warmed,  
they swam their steeds across the swollen Afen, [\[15\]](#)  
now shrouded by the downpour and the dark,  
i.e., the shadow cast by the western ocean. [\[16\]](#)  
The troubled suckling sobbed incessantly  
as the beasts braved the gushing Mendip grade,  
until seditious Hilda charged the king

to find a hiding place from heaven's weep.

The Selwood Britons knew a nearby cave  
that could accommodate them, man and mammal,  
but which unquiet *ylfa* occupied,  
the souls of British folk who'd gone to ground  
before Artorius cleared Badon Hill. [\[17\]](#)

Dismounting, they crept up the drowning slope,  
and soon the soaked company was gathered  
within the cavern's humid vestibule.  
The herders raised a smoky blaze from sticks  
their brother herders had collected there,  
and when the spent band was bedded down,  
Athulf's offspring plucked a burning brand  
and stepped into the black throat of the hollow. [\[18\]](#)

He knew he had dishonored Father Cerdic  
by forfeiting his kingdom to the foe—  
indeed, he'd forfeited his very manhood. [\[19\]](#)  
Alone in this remote, low-ceilinged tomb  
he might relieve his people of the taint  
his sin would drizzle on their hearts forever.  
He drew his knife, the kind once knapped from stone, [\[20\]](#)  
from which the hardy Saxons took their name  
before Weland taught them to soften iron.  
Freed from his foulness, Athelnoth and Odda  
would set up Edward atheling as their king. [\[21\]](#)  
The Saxon's footstep quickened; then he stopped.  
Did he deserve to see his son succeed?  
What if our high Deemer wanted him  
to slaughter Edward and his other lambs  
to quash the propagation of his shame? [\[22\]](#)

The twig lit up a pillar not far off  
the Lord had dyed with tinctures of the sky  
and rusty swords drooped like thorns from the roof.  
Another, straighter, column just ahead  
was stained the verdigris of fir or pine

and at its base, abandoned, sat a skull.  
The flame-light glistened on the king's keen edge  
and on his living nails, and now he knew  
our fathers' God, the Lord of Hosts, was near.  
He spoke no word of judgment or command,  
nor did he illustrate the curse of sin,  
nor figure forth the fortunes of his folk,  
yet Alfred, son of Athelwulf, was changed.  
He felt as if he'd wakened from a dream.  
"There is a God in Israel," he said,  
and then in book Latin said the same,  
*"Hodie est Deus in Israhel."* [\[23\]](#)

The moon had risen and the sun had sunk  
when Alfred and his squadron halted where  
the Roman road to Salisbury began. [\[24\]](#)  
"Men," he said to Denulf and his crew,  
"you've freed our family from our iron bonds. [\[25\]](#)  
Your wives and children yearn for your return.  
This army road will take you home. Now go." [\[26\]](#)

"You misconstrue your troops," said Denewulf  
without so much as glancing at the herdsmen.  
"We've put our palms to the plow. *Porro, princeps.*" [\[27\]](#)

Passing the last crest of the Mendip heights,  
the company descried a glittering net  
of icy stars thrown by the near-full moon  
over the flooded Somerset moorlands.  
Heaven on earth lay spread below that vantage,  
though Hilda said the imp was deathly ill.

Descending, they took shelter in a barn,  
disquieting sheeted cattle where they slept,  
and when they met the husbandman at daybreak  
they breakfasted on saffron-colored cheese  
and cider redolent of marrow bones.  
The king declared they'd fled from Holt in Wiltshire

intent on joining up with Athelnoth  
at Athelney, a hummock in the flood.

“An eager chief, for now our country’s king,”  
the churl said, to Denewulf’s dismay,  
“and we may join you there if Eadric,  
the king’s thane at Wells, calls up his throng.[\[28\]](#)  
You’ll need a pair of punts to float your ponies.  
Best let them rest until this weather breaks.”

Alfred set out at nightfall with the men  
and Edward, leaving Hilda and the babe  
and puzzled Athelgeofu and Elfthryth  
behind to quarter with the cattle-herders.[\[29\]](#)  
They skirted Glastonbury’s flooded shores,  
a kindly shower wafting from the clouds  
and screening even its outline from sight.  
“I’d love,” said Athulf’s son to Denewulf,  
“to see again the chapel where our Lord,  
who traveled here in youth, prayed to the Father  
and the mud hut from which he watched the ducks  
and which he consecrated to his mother.[\[30\]](#)  
I’d love to see again the flowering thorn  
Joseph, his relation, planted here,  
when he returned to preach Christ to the Britons,  
and contemplate, again, Saint David’s sapphire.[\[31\]](#)  
I’d love to ambulate the abbey grounds  
that Coenwalh confirmed to Bregored,  
to hear mass in Ini’s Roman church,  
and feel the perpetual choir’s swell.”[\[32\]](#)

Only Denewulf heard Alfred’s comments.  
“I pray my king may soon enjoy these things,”  
the swineherd said, “but now is not the time.  
Tonight we recollect our Lord’s descent  
to hell and the victory he won there.[\[33\]](#)  
Besides, the holy isle is thick with devils.”

They splashed and swam across the sunken Brue  
and cranked south, then bent west with Cary,  
threading the poplars, elms, and ill-shaped willows  
that cloaked the feet of the low Polden Hills.  
Soon they forded, flailing physical moonlight,  
and swashed across the moat that ringed Ham Hill.  
Mounting the pent past ragged apple trees,  
Alfred espied three tortured trunks up top  
that loomed above the long-abandoned works. [\[34\]](#)  
He signaled Denewulf, who cried, "Redeemer!  
You know our misery, for you were sold  
and mocked and scourged and tried and crucified.  
And on the day that thrust us in this darkness,  
you cried your Father had forsaken you." [\[35\]](#)  
Each traveler carved the King's cross on his chest.

They found another crumbling Roman home  
whose tessellated pavement told the tale  
of a tall spearman landing from abroad,  
Aeneas, maybe, or his grandson Brutus.  
It showed him marrying a naked dame  
attended by two hovering naked striplings.  
Flanked by twinned, sinuous, man-sized trees,  
the couple pledged their heaven-sponsored love,  
a scarlet, snake-like scarf or garment girdling  
the sinuous trunk of the stout, lustrous bride.  
*"Non sicut ego volo,"* Alfred murmured. [\[36\]](#)  
Decent Denulf, dumb with dread, looked down.

They searched the neighboring shore for fitting craft  
in which to skim the inundated moor.  
Watching a house, which they perceived the seamen  
had seized to keep an eye on Athelney,  
they found a pair of punts equipped with poles. [\[37\]](#)  
Then Scaef's scion started up the trail  
to scrutinize the devils' bivouac.  
"Brother," Beornwulf breathed and briskly followed,

expecting him to wreak a swift revenge  
as when our Lord plundered the ancient foe.[\[38\]](#)

The sinking moon disclosed no sentinels,  
but unlike Nisus and his friend, who stuck  
scores of befuddled Latins where they slept;[\[39\]](#)  
unlike the Saxons under Hathagath,  
who ran the Thuringians through in darkness,  
forestalling their unfaithful Frankish friends;[\[40\]](#)  
and unlike that voracious spawn of Cain  
who gobbled thirty guardsmen, numb with guzzling,  
they fled the stead without a single kill,  
for they intended, with Lord Athelnoth,  
to drive the Danish devils from the realm,  
not just to murder them as fate allowed—  
to hide themselves, like our cloud-buried *Beorn*,  
until they deemed the time was right to strike.[\[41\]](#)

They rested all that day, and when the glorious,  
the overplump, the post-paschal moon  
scaled the eastern sky, expounding triumph,  
they pushed the punts around and shipped the steeds.[\[42\]](#)  
“Yesterday, the fifth day came to pass,”  
said Denewulf, now poling off from shore,  
“when he first fashioned fishes, fowls, and whales.”[\[43\]](#)

“He formed the fish from water, densified,”  
said Alfred, one hand trailing in the flow,  
“the fowl from finer vapors up above.  
Amphibians, like crocodiles and seals,  
like hippopotami and walruses,  
the otters who scrubbed Cuthbert’s feet with their fur,[\[44\]](#)  
and like the *luligo*, who flocks aloft  
six months a year, the other six afloat,  
he must have made by mixing thick and thin.”

“The day before, he lit the firmament,”  
said Denewulf, “with round refulgences



to warm the earth and turn the calendar.  
He launched the other so-called wandering stars,  
which we know by their pagan names, like Venus.  
*Et factum est,*” he added, “the fourth day.” [\[45\]](#)

“Bede claims he hoisted the full moon at sundown,”  
said Alfred, “which depicts his lit-up church.  
That time returns, Egyptian sages say,  
when night and daylight gallop neck and neck  
the twelfth calends of April every year. [\[46\]](#)  
The Nicene bishops blessed that calculation [\[47\]](#)  
but now, in nature, equal day and night  
come earlier, I think, by about a week,  
while the natural full moon anticipates  
the Church’s by two circuits of that body.  
Thus providentially, our *Frea*’s feast, [\[48\]](#)  
in this year of uncountable disasters,  
follows a full moon that rose before,  
not after, as the Prophet’s law commands, [\[49\]](#)  
the equinox the fathers ratified,  
but doubly providentially it yet  
will follow the one his handmaid displays.  
In short, our tables are so wrong, they’re right.”

“You listen to your king,” said Denewulf  
to Edward, huddled under Alfred’s mantle.  
“The third day, he threw shores around the floods  
and heaped up earth, which sprouted grass and trees.  
*Mane et vespere* were the third day.” [\[50\]](#)

“We made landfall in a dead Briton’s barrow,”  
said Ingeld’s seed, “then savored bread and cheer  
from the churl’s herb and apple-bearing *treow*. [\[51\]](#)  
Corporeal things,” he added, squeezing Edward,  
“unlike the angels, yield after their kind.”

“The second day, he fixed his *firmamentum*,”  
Beornwulf declared, “and called it heaven. [\[52\]](#)

He propped the upper waters on his tree."

"A deluge pounded us from on high,"  
the Saxon monarch somberly recalled,  
"the Avon's swollen *frigidarium*  
the sole ablution granted us at Bath." [\[53\]](#)

They heard the water slapping at the boards,  
the hollow thump and slosh of shifting hooves,  
and their low voices carrying in the dark.  
The elder swineherd ventured, "*Fiat lux—*  
let there be light, and *leoht wearp geworht.*" [\[54\]](#)

"A chill light it was," the people's king  
said, "its beams piercing the vitreous deep. [\[55\]](#)  
We iterate that day the fifteenth calends,  
three days before he lit the heaven-candles." [\[56\]](#)  
The king fell silent as the wavelets lapped.

"The Word brought forth all things, all men agree,"  
the seed of Ingeld said, in easier mood,  
"the Word the Ruler got before all worlds. [\[57\]](#)  
But we have heard the heaven and earth he founded  
were mere inchoate realms of soul and matter,  
the matter formless yet, a next-to-nothing  
from which he bred the elements we know."

A gliding bank of clouds snuffed out the moon.  
"Tomorrow he returns from hell," said Denulf.

"*Hwæt la*, tonight," the Saxon chief replied.  
"A day is sown at dusk and sprouts in darkness.  
On the sixth day, he molded man from clay  
and woman from his rib-bone as he slept.  
That doze was our demise, says John the Scot.  
We closed our eyes to him and cherished sin." [\[58\]](#)

"That teaching we reject," said Denewulf.  
"The woman was a blessing, not a curse.

Thus 'male and female he created them.'  
Eve's daughter brewed our Savior in her womb."[\[59\]](#)

"He made us flesh and blood today," said Alfred,  
catching a fleeting glimpse of reconciliation,  
"the day we praise and feast his resurrection."

"His victory blessed the age," said Denewulf,[\[60\]](#)  
"the Sixth Age of the world." King Alfred drifted.  
He woke to gentle rain. The punt had struck  
a tussock or a stump, and Paulus sought  
to calm the clattering colts. The other craft  
came up as white light limned the hulks of hills.

"Here flooded Parrett meets the flooded Tone,"  
the son of Athulf said to Denewulf,  
"that pimple off our bow is Athelney."[\[61\]](#)

Three men like angels held the muddy verge,  
a trampled landing place among the tallows.  
"Halt," cried one, "declare your names and purpose!"

By providence or mere coincidence,  
King Alfred recognized the voice of Bucca,  
the son of Athelsige, Taunton's thane.  
Young Aeffa, Theobald's son, he also knew,[\[62\]](#)  
and tall Tata, an Aller farmer's son.  
His cloak black and overweight with rain, [\[63\]](#)  
the seed of Sceaf struggled to his feet.

"We're friends of Athelnoth's," he cried, "no rowers!"  
"You come ashore alone," young Bucca shouted.  
"And hold your boats a little farther off.  
Good. Now throw us your spears and swords."[\[64\]](#)

The rain had ceased when Bucca and the king—  
his hands bound fast, as if he were a traitor—  
stepped up the track among the budding willows.  
The Athulfing rejoiced to tread free earth.

Rounding to greet the risen sun, whose coming  
the improvising thrushes magnified,  
he asked whether the folk would keep the feast.[\[65\]](#)

“The Mercian monk who served the king,” said Bucca,  
“served mass last night. Today we’ll roast a lamb.”[\[66\]](#)

Soon Alfred saw a makeshift hut, then others,  
and Saxons hauling water and hewing wood.  
No man or woman recognized the king,  
though one young creature quickly crossed herself  
when she caught sight of his ill-boding eye.  
Stopping, the youth knocked on a sagging lintel.

“Sir,” young Bucca called, “a Saxon chieftain.[\[67\]](#)  
With half a dozen men and seven mounts.”  
The thane of Somerton emerged bareheaded.[\[68\]](#)  
He scanned the prisoner’s scars and weathered cheeks  
and groaning, fell heavily to his knees.[\[69\]](#)

“Down, soldier,” barked the thane to startled Bucca.[\[70\]](#)  
“On your knees, and cut these shameful bonds.  
Pardon, Lord. The boy still mourns his father.  
As do we all. Lord Athelsige’s dead.”

The youngster knelt and said, “I thought you might—[\[71\]](#)  
I thought you were—I don’t know what I thought.”

“Another gap in the shield-wall,” said Alfred.  
It seemed to him that Athelnoth was making  
a rapid calculation in his head.  
“Your brother was my brother,” Alfred added.[\[72\]](#)

Soon other Saxons gathered, kneeling down  
and calling out, “The king is here! The king!”  
The Athulfing turned slowly where he stood,  
imbibing with his unbenighted eye  
a lonely people’s longing for their lord.[\[73\]](#)  
He greeted several ministers and friends

including Werwulf, his unwarlike cleric,  
and Wiglaf and his brother, who, with Alfred,  
had felled a fearsome tusker on that spot.[\[74\]](#)

Sobs and embraces, joy and shame exchanged,  
the seed of Ingeld cried, "We praise the Father,  
for he has loosed our Savior from the tomb![\[75\]](#)  
And as he floated Noah through the flood  
with newborn Sceafa, his son, our father,  
and set him on a summit striped with vines;[\[76\]](#)  
so has he spared our lives and brought us to you  
under this kindly blue and these high trees.  
And just as he hid David from mad Saul  
in woodlands, hill-forts, caves, and palaces,  
so has he shielded me from heathen fiends.[\[77\]](#)

"*Pax vobiscum*, Saxons.[\[78\]](#) When the Lord  
first fetched our fathers to this footing  
to fight the Picts and Scots for the drubbed Britons,  
he gave them no more room than this low hill,  
this hip, this hump, this Athelney, this clay!  
Rejoice, friends, and feast his resurrection!"

With sharp applause the gathering disbanded,  
and folk set about readying the meal.  
Lavishly they fueled the cooking fires  
and simmered *næpas* (turnips) and dried peas,  
cabbages and beets, parsnips and carrots.  
They broiled trout and eels in the flames,  
cracked lapwing eggs to scramble with new ramsons,  
and briskly parted the blessed lamb from his dam.[\[79\]](#)  
Before the sun, swimming the upper sky,  
had touched the *furculum* of her excursion,  
the Saxons had forgathered in the clearing  
to munch and gulp and jest in memory  
of our Redeemer's temporary death.[\[80\]](#)

The feast dispatched, a grappling match was held

in which a fleshy Welshman won the cup,  
the last ration of Athelnoth's red mead,  
by bloodying a boy from Somerton.  
Young Bucca bore away the bowman's prize,  
the wrinkled, blood-black apple that he bored,  
while one of Athelnoth's proficient tenants  
merited half a length of boiled pudding  
for outpoling the other seven punts  
by half a length from a far, flooded elm.

When the seventeenth moon had heaved its paunch  
over the shire's corrugated bourn,  
King Alfred joined his thane and Eanfled,  
his lady, in the darkness of their hut.[\[81\]](#)

"Our chief has seen and shared our poverty,"[\[82\]](#)  
said Athelnoth. "Our feast today will whet  
tomorrow's fast. A sack of grain remains.  
If need be, we'll survive on elver pie."  
He halted, then resumed, his somber voice  
a candle in the night to Alfred's ear.

"I fear, *Frea*, our meagerness of spirit  
more than the devils and our lean-limbed fare."[\[83\]](#)  
We have a dozen sword-carrying guardsmen,  
ready on any day to stake their hides  
on ousting the horrible oarsmen from our country.[\[84\]](#)  
Another dozen nobles and their cousins  
are here to fight for cattle, friends, and fields.  
The rest are untrained husbandmen, good churls[\[85\]](#)  
who may have clashed with badgers, wolves, and bears  
but never with these veteran invaders.

"The boldest would join Athelheah in Selwood,"  
the thane of grassy Somerton went on,  
"and kill our less-than-welcome guests piecemeal."[\[86\]](#)  
I pray it is no sin to let, post-Easter,  
the blood of men that shed our brother's blood.[\[87\]](#)

"The fearful urge surrender on such terms,"  
Lord Athelnoth, invisible, continued,  
"as lowliness might coax from Godrum's scorn.  
They point to the prosperity of Wulfhere  
and other Saxon chiefs who serve the sailors.

"Some Saxons even hold the time has come  
for us to flee the fields our forebears seized,  
citing Cunedda's settlement of Gwynedd  
with the men he led south to fight the Scots.[\[88\]](#)  
They say we should petition our Welsh allies  
for plots of dirt to plant new building-timbers.[\[89\]](#)  
We've spent a wretched winter in this prison."

The *cyning* lay in blackness on the bed  
that Eanfled had spread with musty fleeces.[\[90\]](#)  
"There is a God in Israel," he said.  
*"Hodie est Deus in Israhel."*[\[91\]](#)  
We must not disappoint our fighting men,  
for they hope in the Lord, a man of war.[\[92\]](#)  
Tomorrow sundown, Beornwulf and I,"  
he said, "with seven of our hoard- and hall-guards,  
will strike out for the nearest Saxon steading.[\[93\]](#)  
Night after night, our men will cross the moors,  
spreading a sweat of fear among the sailors  
and gathering grub for growling Saxon bellies.[\[94\]](#)  
To nourish our people's souls, we'll build a church  
and sing the psalms at nightfall and sunrise.  
And every *wer and wif*, each man and woman,  
will undertake the exercise of arms."

As Athelnoth took in his chieftain's words,  
he sensed a largeness in his voice, which filled  
the hut as though it were a vaulted hall.  
Resuming, Sceaf's studious scion said,  
"As for abandoning our fathers' country—

when Rome lost forty thousand men at Cannae  
and the foes collected three pecks of rings,  
Metellus moved to yield Italy.  
But Scipio, *agnomen Africanus*,  
holding his drawn sword to the senator's throat,  
forced the man to swear to hold the land."[\[95\]](#)

The king fell silent. Lady Eanfled,  
after a pause, spoke from her rustling couch.  
"I pray for dearest Ealhswith and Wulfthryth.  
May *Frea* keep them safe among the Danes."[\[96\]](#)

Her words cut deep. Within the cabin's shadow  
a thicker darkness shrouded Alfred's heart.  
The wound was still too fresh, despite the mercy  
the Lord had poured on him, for him to join  
the lady in her prayer.[\[97\]](#) He lay awake  
until an angel brushed his lids with sleep.

At daybreak, Alfred unsheathed his sword,  
great Ecgbert's gift, you know, from Charles the Great,  
and, followed by the thane of Somerton  
and crowding churls, servants, reeves, and thanes,  
ripped in the mold the footprint of a church.[\[98\]](#)  
While some set stakes, ran line, and dug the ruts  
that would hold fast the stripped and dressed foundations,  
others toppled trees the moon would seal,  
oak for the roofbeam, elm for upright posts,  
alder for sills, and apple for the rood.[\[99\]](#)  
Some squared and bored the timbers, some carved pegs,  
while boys and girls cut withy-whips and reeds[\[100\]](#)  
to wall and roof the hopeful edifice.  
The king designed a nave with no arcade,  
no transept, apse, or diaconicon—  
a wattled ark to waft his people homeward.

The thane remarked, "I doubt our ancestors  
built shrines to Grim before they filled their guts."[\[101\]](#)



His captain said, "I don't doubt they prayed."

Next day, the king and Athelnoth looked on  
as untested churls, paired with guardsmen,  
waggled wooden swords and woven shields.[\[102\]](#)

"If they shrink so from our own men," said Alfred,  
"what terror will the foreigners inspire?"

He called the mismatched files to attention.

"Listen, Saxons," Ingeld's scion cried.

"You drill like men who love their wretchedness.

Through Adam's lapse, or by our Father's will,  
unceasing warfare is the lot of men,  
our place in life to seize and fight for land.

The Romans opened Janus' temple gates  
to signify the city was at war.

In seven centuries before our Savior  
assumed the flesh and vesture of a man  
the brazen gates were shut for just one year.

And this is how Orosius describes  
the Romans' second Carthaginian struggle,  
when Hannibal invaded Italy:

'Hopeless, the Romans fought, and fighting, conquered.'" [\[103\]](#)

He felt he'd said enough about the Romans.

"When the Lord God lent his strength to our arms,  
we whipped the Danes at Hingston Down and Oakley,  
at Winchester, and ever-glorious Ashdown,  
a name that will endure a thousand years." [\[104\]](#)

He stopped, choked by a hard lump in his throat.

"Our fathers and their fathers—they were men.

What they did, by his mercy, we can do.

Don't fear the fierce berserkers in their fury.

Madly, they invoke the souls of bears

but summon only hateful, treacherous devils,

while you, washed by his blood, watched by his angels,

who quick as thought receive intelligence

and strength and courage from the higher choirs,

you will prevail, for a faithful *gubbeorn* is more cunning, more skilled, and bolder than any ghost or prisoner of hell.”[\[105\]](#)

The churls listened quite religiously, for every moment Alfred spoke was one the guardsmen’s onset didn’t petrify them. “I trusted my two eyes,” the king continued. “I now trust *Tirfruma* to light my way.”[\[106\]](#) Come, Athelnoth. Men, this is how we fight.”

Equipped with ashen wands and willow shields, they faced each other in the silent ring. No sooner had their targes touched than Alfred pushed the expectant minister’s up high and thrust, his thane at once both parrying[\[107\]](#) and hollowing like a sail catching air. The bashful *buras* murmured their esteem[\[108\]](#) as Alfred thrust again and Athelnoth parried and purled about and punched at him with a long length of limb and peeled blade. The churls cheered and cheered, for they soon saw their captains were accomplished warriors, and they could not imagine that the mermen could field abler fighters than their *frean*.[\[109\]](#)

“Come,” said Alfred, “like a wild beast!”[\[110\]](#) Rolling his eyes, the Somersetan growled and champed the plaited margin of his play-shield,[\[111\]](#) then roared and rushed the waiting Saxon chieftain. Alfred son of Athulf was transformed into a monster more than merely man, tempting his friend by feints and frenzied jinks to waste his fighting power on images.[\[112\]](#)

The men forgot these bruisers were their *gubfruman*[\[113\]](#) and cheered as though two village rivals fought to vindicate the honor of their cousins.

The thane fell on his elf-instructed king,  
pinning his prince's paw under his punnet.[\[114\]](#)  
"Yield, chief," he said, "unless you mean  
to show us you won't just pour your blood-wine  
but will retake this God-forsaken land.[\[115\]](#)  
Or sink and see me make peace with Gorm!"

The *frea* feared he'd faint before he freed  
his bone-house from the brunt of his bold *beorn*.[\[116\]](#)  
"*Dryhten*," he muttered deep in his dull spirit  
and, swiftly twisting trunk and neck, he banged  
his basket into the battler's whiskered chin,  
then paddled free and pounced upon his provost  
and shoved one elbow towards his shoulder blades.[\[117\]](#)  
A curt struggle, a strangled yelp of pain,  
and the rough Somersetan reeve surrendered.  
The people's king stood up to jubilation  
and like a well-loved village champion  
was carried through the camp by cheering men.[\[118\]](#)

The next night, after hours of rehearsals,  
the seed of Cerdic launched his maiden raid.  
They fetched a folk-cow and a freight of hay,  
and a red buck Bucca took with his spear.[\[119\]](#)  
Another night, three crews retrieved three oxen,  
whose owners Alfred promised to make whole.[\[120\]](#)  
The king and twenty men assessed Low Ham,  
returning with four oxen and five cows,  
six sacks of grain, eleven kegs of ale,  
and eight herdsmen to enhance their host.

Arming the churls was the chief's next office,  
so Alfred met with Athelnoth to craft  
a foray to resplendent Glastonbury.[\[121\]](#)  
Some fifty men they picked for the attempt  
and borrowed boats from nearby villages.[\[122\]](#)  
They even built an abbey out of sticks  
to illustrate the movements of each troop[\[123\]](#)

and practiced landing in the reeds by night.

Those times, the Athulfing was given dreams.

In one, he and Denewulf swam their horses, [\[124\]](#)  
whelmed by heaving swells, towards the high minster, [\[125\]](#)  
but as they neared the building it dissolved,  
as if its walls and beams were formed of mist.  
Choking, he heard the choir singing mass  
and woke with pounding heart before he drowned.  
Another night, he knelt before the abbot,  
his mother, Osburh, watching as a witness,  
just as he'd once knelt before Pope Leo,  
who dubbed him consul of Britannia—[\[126\]](#)  
but standing in for Herefrith, whose doom  
as Glastonbury's abbot was unknown, [\[127\]](#)  
he thought he saw Saint Cuthbert or Saint Neot,  
Saint David's sapphire blazing on his brow,  
enjoining him to glorify the Life-Lord. [\[128\]](#)  
These dreams, which Denewulf construed as signs  
the Saxons would dislodge the dire invaders, [\[129\]](#)  
buoyed up the son of Athelwulf's resolve  
until, one night, he chanced on Ealhswith,  
who gestured at him from her fiery doorway.  
When Alfred woke, concupiscent yet stricken,  
he knew not whether his brave Mercian make  
was trapped in blistering Chippenham or hell. [\[130\]](#)

One day a churl and the churl's household  
appeared from Horsey under Polden Hill. [\[131\]](#)  
Levyng local folk, including miners,  
the Danes had ditched a strong redoubt at Down End.

"When our encircling sea," said Scaef's seed, [\[132\]](#)  
"withdraws into its subterranean hollows,  
this ark, like unclean carrion, will draw  
Froda's Jutes from Somerton and Taunton.  
Despite our efforts here, our Saxon farmers  
will not brook the foreigners' shield-wall. [\[133\]](#)

A rapid relocation may be prudent,  
as when the Prophet fetched the folk from Egypt.”[\[134\]](#)

The western thane replied indignantly,[\[135\]](#)  
“Our Glory-King, *prymcyning*, cursed the cowards  
who clamored to evacuate to Egypt  
when Babylon invaded Israel.[\[136\]](#)  
This country is our home, our cherished ground.[\[137\]](#)  
God brought us from the Saxon swamps, where Roman  
swordsmen sawed our fathers’ fathers’ fathers.  
A Roman highway rides the Polden ridge.[\[138\]](#)  
A swarm of Saxons pouring down that track  
would roll Godrum’s host into the Parrett.”

King Alfred stared with glassy eye beyond  
his Somersetan satellite and said,[\[139\]](#)  
“Maybe the end of the Sixth Age has come.  
There is a pregnant prophecy in Scripture:  
‘I saw a beast rising out of the sea—  
*vidi de mari bestiam ascendentem.*’[\[140\]](#)  
If John predicted Gorm’s bloodthirsty horde,  
our Lord wants us to challenge them, not run.”

[\[1\]](#) Metod, cild, feorhbold (OE)

[\[2\]](#) K. Edwin d. 632; 626

[\[3\]](#) St. Benedict d. 543; broðor, crocchwer (OE)

[\[4\]](#) St. John the Apostle; attordrinca (OE)

[\[5\]](#) K. Beorhtric d. 802; lady (OE); hordweard (OE)

[\[6\]](#) sunu (OE); Charles s. of Charles

[\[7\]](#) nunnhired (OE)

[\[8\]](#) d. 744; d. 431

[\[9\]](#) Mar. 19, 878

[10] K. Ceawlin acc. 560; 577

[11] mægþ (0E)

[12] 877

[13] hyrdeas, heorda (0E)

[14] modcearig (0E)

[15] Bath; Avon (0E)

[16] Mar. 20, 878; St. Cuthbert

[17] mearh, horse (0E); elves (0E); ca. 500

[18] hol (0E)

[19] feond, werhad (0E)

[20] saxum (L)

[21] Odda ald. of Devon

[22] Demend (0E)

[23] 1 Sam. 17:46; boclæden (0E)

[24] Good Friday, Mar. 21, 878; St. Benedict; Searburh (0E)

[25] secgas, isenfetora (0E)

[26] herestræt (0E)

[27] Luke 9:62; onward, prince (L)

[28] eðelcyning, þegn (0E)

[29] Mar. 22, 878; ecclesiastical full moon; cuhyrdeas (0E)

[30] modor (0E)

[31] St. Joseph of Arimathea; gesweor, Bryttas (0E)

- [32] K.Coenwalh acc. 643; abb. ca. 667; K. Ini acc. 688
- [33] gupgewinn, battle (0E)
- [34] æppeltreow (0E)
- [35] Fæder; Ps. 21:2
- [36] “not as I will”; Matt. 26:39
- [37] sāmenn (0E)
- [38] broðor, ealdfeond (0E)
- [39] Aeneid bk. ix
- [40] þeostru (0E); Scheidungen 531
- [41] wyrd (0E); hero (0E)
- [42] Easter Sunday, Mar. 23, 878; stedan (0E)
- [43] Gen. 1:21; fifta dæg (0E)
- [44] nicras, horshwalas, oteras (0E)
- [45] Gen. 1:14-19; feorþa dæg (0E)
- [46] Mar. 21
- [47] 325
- [48] Lord (0E)
- [49] Ex. 12:6
- [50] mentel (0E); Gen. 1:9-13; gærs, treow (0E); morning and evening (L); se þridða dæg (0E)
- [51] appelbære (0E)
- [52] Gen. 1:6-7; uprodor, heofon (0E)
- [53] cooling pool (L)

- [\[54\]](#) Gen. 1:3; geweorðe leoht (OE); and there was light (OE)
- [\[55\]](#) leoht, leodcynning (OE)
- [\[56\]](#) Mar. 18; heofoncandele (OE)
- [\[57\]](#) Wealdend (OE)
- [\[58\]](#) se sixta dæg (OE); Gen. 1:27, 2:21-22; John Scotus Erigena d. 877
- [\[59\]](#) “werhades and wifhades, he gesceop hig” (OE); Hælend (OE)
- [\[60\]](#) sige (OE)
- [\[61\]](#) blædre (OE)
- [\[62\]](#) “Tibbald”
- [\[63\]](#) bratt (OE)
- [\[64\]](#) wæpengepræc (OE)
- [\[65\]](#) folc (OE)
- [\[66\]](#) lamb (OE)
- [\[67\]](#) leof (OE)
- [\[68\]](#) þegn (OE)
- [\[69\]](#) hæftling (OE)
- [\[70\]](#) scealc, þegn (OE)
- [\[71\]](#) cnapa (OE)
- [\[72\]](#) broðor (OE)
- [\[73\]](#) s. of K. Athelwulf d. 858; leod (OE)
- [\[74\]](#) eofor (OE)
- [\[75\]](#) Hælend (OE)



[76] Sceaf; Gen. 9:30

[77] 1 Kings 22:1, 5; 23:14-18; 27:3

[78] peace be with you (L)

[79] cawelas, betan, feldmoran, wealhmoran, ælas, hramsan (OE)

[80] sunne (OE); turning point (L); Alysand (OE)

[81] þegn, freo (OE)

[82] hæfenleast (OE)

[83] Lord (OE); fiend (OE)

[84] sweordboran (OE)

[85] yrþlingas (OE)

[86] þegn, cwellan, bitmælum (OE)

[87] Easter (OE); Gen. 9:5; blod (OE)

[88] K. Cunedda I 5th c.

[89] boldgetimbru (OE)

[90] fliesu (OE)

[91] 1 Sam. 17:46

[92] Ex. 15:3

[93] hordweardas, seleweardas (OE)

[94] ferendas (OE)

[95] Orosius bk. iv

[96] the Lord (OE)

[97] sipwif (OE)

[\[98\]](#) feldcirice (0E)

[\[99\]](#) ac, elm, alor, æppel (0E)

[\[100\]](#) wiðigas, hreod (0E)

[\[101\]](#) þegn (0E)

[\[102\]](#) scildas (0E)

[\[103\]](#) Orosius bk. iv

[\[104\]](#) 838; 851; 860; 871

[\[105\]](#) wodlic, beran; blod, englas, eafod and ellen (0E); warrior (0E); gast, hellehæftling (0E)

[\[106\]](#) Source-God (0E)

[\[107\]](#) þegn (0E)

[\[108\]](#) farmers (0E)

[\[109\]](#) ceorlas, frecan (0E); lords (0E)

[\[110\]](#) wilde deor (0E)

[\[111\]](#) plegscild (0E)

[\[112\]](#) K. Athelwulf d. 858; forsceapen, ælwiht, ellencræft (0E)

[\[113\]](#) war-chiefs (0E)

[\[114\]](#) þegn, fengel (0E)

[\[115\]](#) onblotan blodwin (0E)

[\[116\]](#) lord, hero (0E)

[\[117\]](#) Lord (0E); cempa, prafost (0E)

[\[118\]](#) þeoden (0E)

[\[119\]](#) folccu, buc (0E)

- [\[120\]](#) þry, oxan (0E)
- [\[121\]](#) ceorlas, cræftan, Glæstingaburh (0E)
- [\[122\]](#) fiftig menn (0E)
- [\[123\]](#) truma (0E)
- [\[124\]](#) mearas (0E)
- [\[125\]](#) mynster (0E)
- [\[126\]](#) Leo IV 847–855; heretoga (0E)
- [\[127\]](#) abbot of Glastonbury
- [\[128\]](#) Liffrea (0E)
- [\[129\]](#) scipfaran (0E)
- [\[130\]](#) lustgiernende, maca, hell (0E)
- [\[131\]](#) ceorles hired (0E)
- [\[132\]](#) sæd (0E)
- [\[133\]](#) buras, bordhaga (0E)
- [\[134\]](#) folc (0E)
- [\[135\]](#) þegn (0E)
- [\[136\]](#) Jer. 42:15-22
- [\[137\]](#) ham, eardlufu (0E)
- [\[138\]](#) herestræt, hrycg (0E)
- [\[139\]](#) dryhtgesith (0E)
- [\[140\]](#) Rev. 13:1

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William G. Carpenter taught literature at various universities and currently practices law in Minneapolis. His translation of *The Dream of the Rood* was published in the *Sewanee Theological Review*. *Eþandun: Epic Poem* (Beaver's Pond Press, 2021), hardbound with illustrations by Miko Simmons, is available at [www.williamgcarpenter.com](http://www.williamgcarpenter.com) and from Amazon. The e-book is available on Amazon and from other e-book outlets.

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