

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



Despite his fear, despite the nearing fiends,  
joy sprouted in him like an acorn.

## VIII: Visit with a Witch

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

*Alfred observes as the earls arbitrate a dispute between Hrothulf and Wiga. In a private meeting with Guthrum, Alfred summons his own departed spirit, who urges Guthrum to convert. Hrothulf rebels. With Beornwulf's help, Alfred attempts to rescue his family from the Danes.*

The raven flag, untouched by meager rays  
escaping from the fragrant reek, their prison,  
to sparkle on the fastenings that prinked  
the earls' pelts and silks, hung high above  
the one-eyed bard who stood in shadow next  
to Godrum's trophy of his final triumph:  
a wooden cross displaying Alfred's helm,  
his Frankish sword, his chain-mail coat, his cloak,  
and the piteous crucifix of tusk  
the float-men had filched from Edmund's hoard.[\[1\]](#)

"Welcome to our refurbished hall," said Gormr,  
"especially Lord Wiga and Lord Hrothulf,  
who bring your controversy to this body  
instead of craving comfort from the choosers.[\[2\]](#)  
By way of thanks, you'll each lead home a calf  
fatted on milk and mash in Alfred's barn."[\[3\]](#)

Lord Wiga, with his pained, important mien,  
aware of the distrust the rugged Jutes  
cherished towards the royal locum tenens,  
indeed towards all the haughty Zealand men,  
stood and scanned the faces round the table.[\[4\]](#)

"High lords," the Ringsted nobleman began,  
"as assignee of Cuthred's lands at Twinham—"

"Excuse me, rulers," Hrothulf interposed,

“but isn’t it ridiculous, and strange,  
that we should wrangle over a dead Saxon?  
Our Haca was provoked,” the hero urged,  
“for which the meddling monk was justly punished.[\[5\]](#)  
That said, let Hampshire’s high steward speak,[\[6\]](#)  
but not before you satisfy our queries  
pertaining to the nature of this meeting.”

Wiga glanced at Godfred’s grandson’s face,  
a sea whose skin no swimming serpent creased.[\[7\]](#)  
“Go on,” said Gorm, aware beyond all doubt  
the youngster meant to dent his dignity.  
Wiga sat as Hrothulf moved behind  
their chief and placed two paws on his broad shoulders.

“First,” he said, “confirm our friend and cousin  
presides here as a brother lord, a peer,  
not as our king or as our *dux bellorum*.[\[8\]](#)  
We’ve come to settle private grievances,  
not seek direction from our martial council.”

The warrior’s presumption irked the earls,  
who knew he gloried in his royal blood.[\[9\]](#)  
“That’s so,” conceded murdered Godfred’s scion,  
“that’s why no Saxons sit with us today  
except, of course, our Nordalbingian friend,  
whom I don’t even think of as a Saxon.[\[10\]](#)  
That cohort meets tomorrow. We expect  
Lord Wulfhere, our co-regent, to attend.  
Athelnoth has raised a force on the Thone.”

Ingeld’s seed, unmoving in the gloom,  
felt like a falcon’s flapping, plunging prey  
that dives into the shelter of an elm  
only to tumble out the other side,  
exposed to his pursuer’s twitted fury.  
So Athelnoth yet kept his men in arms—  
yet Wiltshiremen would muster with the Danes!

“Second, heads,” said Hrothulf, rounding on Alfred,  
“must we deface the wisdom of the Danes  
by suffering this Christian in our midst?  
Doesn’t he have hogs to slop or slaughter?”  
He clutched a fistful of the harper’s shirt  
and scrutinized his eye, his hair, his scars.  
“We hear he scorns our gods,” the youth pursued.  
“We hear our cousin lends his ear to twaddle  
on how the Roman god was born a slave  
who let himself be nailed up and speared.  
Don’t let that wizard part us from our fathers  
who fry, the Christians say, with Frey and Grim.”

Said Wiga, “Don’t shy at their so-called Savior.  
Our rulers haven’t banned the Christian shrines,[\[11\]](#)  
which comfort traders up from Christian countries.  
If Hrothulf grieves for our neglected gods,  
let him address his briefly royal uncle,  
who licensed Anskar’s mission to repay  
the emperor for backing him as king.” [\[12\]](#)

“Enough,” admonished Gormr. “Mervyn stays.  
Respecting his religion, we may study  
the customs of the foreigners we govern.”

Now Alfred listened as the Ringsted lord  
recounted killings by Lord Hrothulf’s crews.  
He watched as honest sailors climbed the dais  
and told what they had seen and heard and done.[\[13\]](#)  
The Saxon nation-king detested hearing[\[14\]](#)  
foreign lords expounding foreign laws  
on Saxon soil, yet he recognized  
that men adept in council, war, and trade  
would make fit ministers for Saxon princes  
if they would only bow to heaven’s King.  
Indeed, he marveled at our Father’s mercy,  
which grants even to fiend-ridden strangers—  
men who’d never chewed on Lupus’ digest



of Salic, Ripuarian, and Lombard codes,  
as well as Alamannic and Bavarian—[\[15\]](#)  
which grants even devilish invaders  
the wherewithal to manacle their rancor  
in bonds of law and nurture peace with judgment.  
And yet, old Godrum and the seed of Hemming,  
this kingdom-builder and his junior scourge,  
for all their deference to legal forms,  
sought each to wield the harper's hidden arts  
against his lawless, irritating rival.

Some hours later, in his counting room,  
"Discourse, O leech," the weary heathen said,  
"you saw how Halga's offspring mocked my office." [\[16\]](#)

Old Mervyn paced the floor and wrung his hands.  
The Dane had no more patience for delays,  
but Alfred had a stratagem to sway him.  
"*Domne*," he said, "when I learned Alfred's widow, [\[17\]](#)  
as well as his remains, were in your hands,  
I thanked the Thunderer, who'd heard my prayers.  
But then he grudged me further signs and wonders,  
so last night I lay down among the swine—  
for dreams may come from devils or the Lord." [\[18\]](#)

"And did you dream?" asked murdered Godfred's seed.  
"I was back in Dumnonia as a boy,"  
the harper said, "before King Ecgbert came,  
the dragon egg the Germans call 'the Great.' [\[19\]](#)  
The sea was seething far beneath the cliffs,  
as dark as lapis streaked with marble foam,  
and gulls were lifting on the breeze like snowflakes.  
Inside I found my mother at her altar."

From a cloth sack, the Saxon took a flask,  
a beechwood bowl, and oak-plucked mistletoe.  
"'Poor Mervyn,' said my mother," Alfred said,  
"'you shall endure much grief before our Savior

reunites us in the Resurrection.

But you can always call on holy David  
to disentangle your perplexities.[\[20\]](#)

Burn mistletoe,' she said, 'the mystic sign  
that we survive our graves—'" Dead Ingeld's seed  
laid the plump spray on Godrum's brazier.  
"'—then dab the sign of victory on your lips,'  
she said, 'with water from last summer's hail.'" [\[21\]](#)

"Another sign of deathless life," said Godrum.  
"'But Mama,' I replied, 'your son is old now,'  
for in the dream she saw me as a child.  
She said no more, but stared at me with eyes  
as vast and black as any painted saint's."

As Osburh's offspring blinked and wiped his cheek,  
the sailor stroked his silver-salted beard.  
"Saint David," Alfred muttered seven times.  
The seed of Godfred was about to speak  
when the dull sprig broke into yellow flame.  
The Saxon crumpled, widening his eyes.  
"No!" he cried, "The smoke! The stink! The fiends!"  
The pagan stared, his interest mixed with fear.  
"What creeping thing defiles my prayers," said Alfred,  
or the harsh ghost that occupied his throat,  
"some *ælf* or orc, or the mongrel known as man?" [\[22\]](#)

Gorm's lips parted, but Alfred ducked and spun.  
"So please your worship, Mervyn of Saint Merryn.  
Is this the noted hermit, holy David?"

The harper turned to face himself and cried,  
"Saint David to the likes of you. Be gone!  
But wait. A training angel hails me.  
I see, sir. *Gise*. Yes. Thy will be done.  
Son, a spirit needs to speak with you.[\[23\]](#)  
I must resume the arduous devotions  
by which I scour the plaques that mar my soul."[\[24\]](#)

Guthrum clung unmoving to his perch,  
gripping the seat with white-knuckled fists.  
The harper rose, his clouded globe exposed  
and rumbled at his interlocutor:

"Where is this epigone of Roman Brut,  
slave to the Dane and traitor to the land  
that fed him milk and honey all his days?" [\[25\]](#)

The balding, one-eyed jocolator quaked.  
"Down here I'm known as Mervyn the Musician—"

Straightening again, the Saxon roared,  
"As Mervyn the apostate renegade  
shall you be cursed and damned forevermore  
when heaven whips the heathens from this island!" [\[26\]](#)

The farer frowned. The Athulfing looked down. [\[27\]](#)  
"I'm just a vile servant, holy lord. [\[28\]](#)  
What can the likes of me—" "Silence!" he bellowed.  
"You know that you're as free as any Caesar  
to execute the King of King's commands.  
The shield of righteousness, the sword of truth, [\[29\]](#)  
the breastplate of faith, inlaid with stones  
spelling the names of the twelve reigning fathers, [\[30\]](#)  
these things were given you in your blessed youth,  
yet here you serve the devilish invader!  
It is reported, worm, that you have conjured  
ill spirits with your spells, unwholesome things,  
who, but for your dear mother's wakeful prayers,  
would speedily have drowned you in hell's mire."

Meek Mervyn bowed his head. "Have mercy, master,"  
but eager Alfred brushed aside his plea.

"You have with you, have you not," he said,  
his chest thrust forward like a dragon's prow, [\[31\]](#)  
"the covetous, stubborn, lustful, wrathful chieftain,  
the murderer the savage Danes call king?"



The pagan raised an unoffended hand.

"I'm here, I'm listening," said Godfred's seed,  
"but why disparage us as savages?"

The Saxons, who are murderers and worse,  
currently occupy this lovely country,  
which we want for our families and friends.

The Saxons' pastures, fields, orchards, woodlands—  
their herds and flocks, their houses, folds, and byres—  
we harvest what we need to live, no more,  
which is our way as men. Of course we cow  
the foreign folk, as any stranger must.  
You call that savagery? We feed our sheep."

"Weg la, say you glut the jaws of wolves,"  
the Saxon cried, "and make the fiend your god!  
You long to rehabilitate this kingdom?  
The higher good, perverted, generates  
the more devastating, venomous sin.  
But know, you feller of your father's brother,  
that he who speaks, by the Almighty's grace,  
to steer your steps from their perilous path  
is Alfred, progeny of Father Cerdic,  
by grace, king of the West Saxon nation,  
of Surrey, Sussex, Essex, Wight, and Kent,  
overlord of Cornwall, Gwent, and Dyfed,  
whom the pope crowned consul of Britannia!" [\[32\]](#)

Relenting, Mervyn babbled to the Dane,  
"That nails it, chief. Your dead enemy's dead,  
as dead as dirt, we say. His house has fallen,  
folded into the filth from which it crawled."

"Keep your titles, ghost," said Godfred's grandson.  
"Just tell me you have truly left this earth."

"You sot!" the son of Athulf cried. "You think  
departed spirits be strengthless beings?" [\[33\]](#)  
Observe your Mervyn. We can cramp his bowels—"

"Ow!" he uttered, buckling—"Singe his footsoles—"  
"Aye!" he cried, prancing on mashed reeds—  
"Or choke his breath in his throat—" "Agh," he gurgled.  
"We do not trouble you," the shade explained,  
fixing the Jutlander with daunting eye,  
"because we know the seed of godlike chieftains  
disdains to yield his manhood to mere pain."

"You have my thanks," said Gormr, "Mervyn's too.  
Now what about our other inquiries,  
or do you charge a mug of blood to comment,  
like our blade-ale-bibbing Danish bogeys?"

"Don't mock me, cousin," [\[34\]](#) Alfred warned, "but hearken  
to your last chance to duck the Father's wrath."

"What do you mean, 'cousin'?" Godrum asked,  
"I know my blood relations all too well."

"We two descend," the seed of Scaef said,  
"from Father Grim, the fruit of Frithuwald,  
who led his nation north in hurried flight  
when Pompey toppled Pontic Mithridates. [\[35\]](#)  
But what has old Woden to do with Christ?  
You shall not die a heathen. *Na*, our Father  
wields you as a rod to chide his children,  
but he will judge the Danes, and they will pay  
to the last faceless penny for their crimes." [\[36\]](#)

"He brings us here, then beats us for our trouble?  
That's how we treat our slaves," the sailor said,  
"but we don't claim their undying love."

"What foreign dog yaps at the Lord our God?"  
cried Alfred. "Fiend, if you bow down to him,  
release our fields, and restore our laws,  
then you may triumph as the ninth *Bretwalda*  
and leave a rich dominion to your heirs. [\[37\]](#)  
But woe if you refuse his clemency

and spit on his commiserating hand!"

"Of what heirs do you speak?" retorted Godrum.

"Will your long-suffering Christian widow bear—"

"Touch one blessed hair," the spirit cried,

"and you'll endure unceasing punishments,  
punctures, fractures, burns, abrasions, maimings—"

"Compose yourself," said Gormr, unperturbed,

"for as you say, a Dane disdains mere pain.

You want your Edward to succeed—I'll crown him—

and drown the twins if Wulfhere interferes.

But what if Father Woden, who sees all, [\[38\]](#)

or the godhead the Saracens adore

or the Greeks' gold-panoplied Pantocrator

should override and thwart your prophecies?

The Danes will say I cheated god and man

just to salve my old-womanish conscience."

Impatiently, the Athulfing exclaimed,

"Our father has submitted. He atones

for his unnumbered sins by continuous prayer." [\[39\]](#)

"Not in your Christian hell," the northman answered,

"where Radbod said to Bishop Willibrord

he'd rather roast forever with his forebears." [\[40\]](#)

"Nearby," the Saxon said, "in shrieking distance. [\[41\]](#)

Where men and men upheld by men as gods,

whom evil angels have impersonated—"

"I've been there," Godfred's seed declared, "I've seen him.

At least he need not watch the honored dead

hack and gorge, gorge and hack till doomsday.

But may I speak with our wise ancestor?

Get his advice on shepherding these sheep?

I'd also like to chat with my poor Harald,"

he added with transparent carelessness.

"Nese," Alfred said. "We have business here.[\[42\]](#)  
You must admit the Lord God's sovereignty  
now, or damn the Danes to endless death!"[\[43\]](#)

The pirate pondered, disinclined to bare  
his soul to such an unindulgent judge.  
"We think it best," the heathen captain said,  
"not yet to brave the celebrated bath.  
Your herdsman aren't inured yet to our rule,  
nor do the earls concur in governing  
the shires as one realm. Thus many sins,  
O brother king, remain to be incurred  
before your God will hallow our new home.  
The founders of your line were prudent men.  
Old Cerdic and one, two, three, four successors  
toiled long at mowing down the Welsh  
before King Cynegeats frisked in the font."[\[44\]](#)

"You do not know the torment they endure,"[\[45\]](#)  
the seed of Ingeld answered solemnly,  
"for spurning him they knew was hovering near—  
nor what undying joy they might have won,  
those kings and their imbrued *gubgesithas*,  
had they revered our King instead of Grim."[\[46\]](#)  
Godfred's grandson offered no reply.  
Alfred laid an oak split on the coals.

"Then what if I accept the dip," said Godrum,  
"espouse your mousy widow—ouch—and vow  
not to enlarge our holdings save by gift,  
devise, foreclosure, partnership, or purchase?"

"Thou shalt not palter with Almighty God!"  
the harper cried. "Stiff-necked Cimmerian,  
your hour is come: eternal bliss or torment!"

"But am I not Artorius reborn,"  
the sailor countered, slumping on his stool,

“avenger of the miserable Cymri?”

The Saxon started, stammered jaggedly,  
then dropped, juddering, churning the trampled rushes.  
The fearful heathen chieftain fell to his knees.

“Alfred son of Athulf, can you hear me?  
I didn’t refuse your offer. Let me speak  
with my unjustly slaughtered son, my Harald.”

A moment passed. “Whom call you, sir?” asked Mervyn,  
rubbing his eyes as if to scatter sleep.

The seed of murdered Godfred helped him up.  
“The Saxon king was here,” he said, “young Alfred.  
Your soul must have traveled to Christian hell.”

“I know we summoned spirits,” said the singer,  
“contrary to *Liffrea’s* living law.” [\[47\]](#)

“Call for some honeyed wine,” said Harald’s father.  
“And Alfred’s willow harp, which you repaired.  
We have a weighty matter to rehash  
before the jarls gather at the trough.” [\[48\]](#)

While they reposed, the alderman appeared,  
looking uncharacteristically concerned. [\[49\]](#)  
“It’s Hrothulf, *rector*. He has taken Wulfthryth  
and her two sons, the athelings, my boys. [\[50\]](#)  
It’s mutiny. Wan fought and killed good Siward.  
Halga commands the gate. Lord Hrut is with him.  
I swear I had no inkling of this treason.”

The skipper scowled at Wulfhere’s news and said,  
“Tell them I’m coming. You keep out of sight.  
Your presence is a sore spot with the earls.”

Throughout this conversation, Alfred saw  
Gorm’s and Wulfhere’s eyes shift to and fro,  
both seeking, both evading, his dim orb

as though they recognized him, but conspired  
to make believe he wasn't Wulfhere's *cyning*  
and Gorm's hereditary enemy—  
as though to give him time, if so God willed,  
to cut their throats and repossess the throne.  
For his part, Alfred loved his brother-sons  
as much as their grandfather Wulfhere did, [\[51\]](#)  
but lacked the men and arms to ransom them  
just as he lacked the means to free his family.  
He felt like one submerged in evil dreams,  
though truly every passage of his life,  
the best, the worst, lit up by grace or sin,  
both when he lived it, and in memory,  
betrayed a like dreamlike, elvish sheen.

The alderman departing, Godrum said,  
“She threw herself at Hrothulf. We have eyes—  
some of us more than one—and we have ears.  
I half-believe your devils are behind this,  
scourging me for serving my own folk. [\[52\]](#)  
You take this blade,” the Jutlander continued,  
proffering a polished antler grip,  
“and ride to where we hold the Saxon royals.  
Take Edward and my lady and some guardsmen  
to Cirencester and wait for my instructions. [\[53\]](#)

“The loss of Smala's son strikes at our heart,”  
he said, “as though Lord Wan were now our god.  
He'd fixed a date with Tunbert for his christening.  
Lord Wiga would have joined him in that plunge.” [\[54\]](#)

The devil rose. “You disappoint me, Mervyn.  
If not for you, I would have crooked the knee  
to him who hammered out this hellish tale,  
the lord low wretches tortured on the cross.”

Gorm stepped into the corridor, then peered  
at Grim's remote descendant through the doorway. [\[55\]](#)



"If the lad gives you grief, just cut his throat.  
It's a meager, ambiguous revenge,  
but Harald won't disown it, nor will I.  
And your all-loving Savior will forgive  
a Briton butchering a Saxon atheling."

Nearing the croft, King Alfred heard the noise  
of fighting men and the ill clash of steel.[\[56\]](#)  
He found the Selwood men pressing the cottage,  
outnumbering Godrum's guards, who goaded them  
with swords and swearwords in their northern tongue.  
The singer slid to earth, the swamping sun[\[57\]](#)  
glazing his blade—he'd snatched it from the hall—  
glazing his blade the gold of Weland's forge.

"Mervyn!" shouted Ulf, old Godrum's steersman,  
"back to the beer-hall, now, and send some men!"  
A Briton turned to spear the new arrival,  
but Beornwulf exclaimed, "My cunning king!"  
The pagan Danes, puzzled to see their harper,  
old Hilda's one-eyed husband of a night,  
advancing, weapon bared, through slanting beams,  
now faltered, fearing a fraud wrought by Grim.  
Beornwulf stuck one beneath the ribs,  
who crumpled like a sail struck inshore,  
as Alfred hewed another through the shoulder.  
The sailor leaned left and pinned Ulf's elbow,[\[58\]](#)  
which Denewulf observing, swung his oar  
at Gorm's steersman's *healsbeorhleas* neck.[\[59\]](#)  
The forehand effort floated forcelessly  
but the Lord God's misericord allowed  
dear Denewulf to deadhead able Ulf.

"Yield, fiends!" the Athulfing declaimed.  
"Your Godrum, Gormr the Great, is in the dust!"

"Surrender Guttorm's queen?" a brigand answered.  
"Better to bleed out while sticking Saxons!"

He thrust, and as the monarch made to parry  
he glimpsed a glinting implement approach  
the man's mailless back, trailing a wrist.  
He wheeled and whipped a gleaming arc behind him  
but hurled high at Hilda's hunching head,  
his edge catching fast in the dwarfish doorjamb.  
King Alfred stabbed his unprotected side  
and hacked into the ridge right of his neck.[\[60\]](#)

Like Cynewulf's last man, who scorned to serve  
the killer of his king, the comer coiled[\[61\]](#)  
then struck into the pack, slashing attackers,  
until a swineherd seized his slippery arm,  
another pried the hide grip from his fist,  
and Beornwulf and both big British lads  
wrestled the rough, still wriggling, to the ground.[\[62\]](#)  
Alfred saw him fade, just as he felt  
the first taps of wet, then followed Hilda  
under the cracked lintel of old oak.

The gloom within was dimmer than the twilight,  
the embers lighting nothing but themselves,  
and the void quiet after wild swordplay  
opened a sudden gulf in Alfred's thought.[\[63\]](#)  
Drawn to the far corner, he discovered  
a drift of tiny ghosts, their features lit  
by a single soot-proliferating candle.  
They gaped up at the shape, *spatha* in hand,[\[64\]](#)  
that loomed and blocked all escape from the cottage.

Pitying their fear, he sought his lady  
and spied a shadow squatting on a footstool  
beside which, on the sacking, Athelflaed  
sat with baby Athelward in her arms.  
His daughter's eyes, wary, juniper-gray,  
looked roofward from the rampart of her brow,  
the elf epitomizing Ealhswith  
as always—not her gaiety and trust,

but her God-given righteousness and courage.[\[65\]](#)

The candle lit the Mercian matron's shoulder;  
a treasury of bracelets cuffed each wrist,  
some known to Alfred, some unknown and foreign.  
Shuddering as the sun of wedded love  
commenced to melt the filth that clogged his heart,  
the monarch knelt and held his helpmeet's shoe.

"Come, quean," the man commanded tenderly.[\[66\]](#)  
"We've relieved your Jutish guard, but Hrothulf's rowers,  
berserkers who are murderers and worse,  
will soon be here to press their ugly work."  
Despite his fear, despite the nearing fiends,  
joy sprouted in him like an acorn.

"I knew you'd come too late," the lady murmured.[\[67\]](#)  
"I promised, to preserve these little ones—"

"We must abscond, my darling," Alfred answered.[\[68\]](#)  
"He's broken every oath he ever swore.  
This knife, which you may recognize, is both  
his token to deliver you from Hrothulf  
and my direction in re our lamb."

"Dogmatically, I claimed the mourning time,"  
she said, "that our law grants abandoned wives,  
but then he led me to a thawing carcass  
fraught with the adornments of my lord."[\[69\]](#)

"I thought it was an artifice, a trick,"[\[70\]](#)  
she added. "Day and night I fed the hope  
my husband would exterminate our jailers!  
But no heavenly angel broke this prison,[\[71\]](#)  
and then I learned my Alfred was nearby  
and knew the merman's mind but martyred no one,  
despite our wedding vows at Wigstan's tomb."  
For Wigstan, Wiglaf's grandson, was her cousin.  
King Beorhtwulf had murdered him for barring

the marriage of his mother, Ceolwulf's daughter,  
to Beorhtfrith, the king's ambitious son,  
on grounds, now unknown, of consanguinity.[\[72\]](#)

Uncomprehendingly the children stared  
save Elfthryth, whom the Spirit moved to laugh.  
Poor Alfred's heart turned over in his chest.

"You take the *lytlingas*," he said to Hilda,  
unable to absorb his consort's words.[\[73\]](#)  
He feared she might smash in the children's heads  
as Gaulish mothers did, who then self-slaughtered  
when the southern sun melted their men at Aix.[\[74\]](#)

"Don't try to breathe life in the dead, my friend,"[\[75\]](#)  
said Ealhswith. "It cost my life, this change  
of loyalty. I do not have another."

"A promise under threat of death," said Alfred  
at random, "may with justice be withdrawn.  
Like John the Apostle, we may sleep, yet live."  
How changeable the poor thing's face, he thought,  
aglow in former times with heaven's daylight,  
now ugly and distorted as a devil's.

"I don't know how I earned your hate," she said,  
"though hating me, you hate yourself, for we  
are man and wife, one flesh, or so they say.  
You turned away, my love. Now listen, Lord.[\[76\]](#)  
Before the fiends had even crossed the border  
you had a plan to shut us up in Frome.  
Although I had attended on my lord  
since I departed from my home, and clove  
to you—although I kept your bed alone  
the lean years you toiled in the field—  
although I crossed five times the deadly strait  
of the birth bed to fetch your progeny—"

"Bone of my bone," King Athulf's baby answered,[\[77\]](#)

smearing the streaks on his blood-mudded cheeks.

"I sent my guards. I thought it was a raid."

"You thought, you thought," she said, "and while you thought—he's an old *gupfrea*, like my father—[\[78\]](#)

I gather neither of you wants me now,  
but this time I'm not going anywhere."

"Come," said Alfred, holding out his hand,  
"only the Lord can see inside our hearts."

"Go," said Ealhswith, "and take your yield.  
I wrong him, though, in giving you our son." [\[79\]](#)

The king felt Hilda's shallow breath behind him.  
"Come out of here, dear Athelflaed," she begged.

"I must attend my lady," she replied. [\[80\]](#)

"She won't survive alone among the fiends."

She spoke as freely as a wise confessor,  
as boldly as a black-gorgeted sparrow  
defending its abode from harrying crows.

"Come, sir," said Hilda. "You can only run."  
Speechless, Alfred knelt before the girl,  
encircling her slight stem in snaking limbs.

"Now go," said Ealhswith, dropping her eyelids.

Following Hilda, Alfred turned once more  
and saw his spouse's face interred in shadow.

As Simeon said, the sword pierced his soul,  
"*suam animam pertransit gladius*,"

or "*þæt sweord hine sawle purhfor*." [\[81\]](#)

He saw his daughter crush close to her dam,  
pillowing her head on layered gems,  
as with one hand, her mother touched her cheek  
and with the other, pinched the beating flame. [\[82\]](#)

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[1] flotmenn (OE); K. Edmund d. 870 [2] \*hal, \*Uiki, \*Ruulf, \*kyrriu (OE) [3] \*kalfr (OE) [4] \*Iotar, \*Siulunt (OE) [5] \*halr (OE) [6] \*hofþiki (OE) [7] \*snakr (OE) [8] \*fronti, \*kunukr (OE) [9] \*bloþ (OE) [10] Theodric [11] \*hærar (OE) [12] \*kup (OE); K. Harald Klak acc. 812, 819, 825; abp. of Hamburg; Emp. Louis [13] æscmenn (OE) [14] þeodcyning (OE) [15] Lupus abb. of Ferrières d. 862 [16] \*afspriki (OE) [17] lord (OE) [18] fiend, Frea (OE) [19] K. Ecgbert acc. 802 [20] 6th c. bp. of Mynyw [21] misteltan, sigetacn (OE) [22] elf, demon (OE); monkyn (OE) [23] sunu (OE) [24] sawol (OE) [25] meolc, hunig (OE) [26] hæðnas (OE) [27] ferend (OE) [28] halig hlaford (OE) [29] scild, rihtwisnys, sop (OE) [30] fæderas (OE) [31] draca (OE) [32] Ælmihtiga, leod, heretoga (OE) [33] sott, mægenleas (OE) [34] mæg (OE) [35] þeod (OE); Orosius bk. vi [36] cildru, pening (OE) [37] Britain-ruler (OE) [38] \*Oþen (OE) [39] Orosius bk. vi [40] k. of Frisians d. 719; Willibrord d. 739 [41] Alfred [42] no (OE) [43] Dryhten, dryhtendom, deap (OE) [44] K. Cerdic d. 534; K. Cynric d. 560; K. Ceawlin d. 593; K. Ceol d. 597; K. Ceolwulf d. 611; 635 [45] susl (OE) [46] war-companions (OE) [47] Life-Lord (OE) [48] \*iarlar (OE) [49] Wulfhere ald. of Wiltshire [50] wid. of K. Athelred; Athelwold and Athelhelm [51] broðorsuna, ealdefæder (OE) [52] \*folk (OE) [53] "Siziter" [54] bp. of Winchester; \*Uiki (OE) [55] Alfred [56] billgesliht (OE) [57] scop (OE) [58] lid (OE) [59] hauberk-less (OE) [60] ungeschilded (OE) [61] K. Cynewulf d. 786; killed by br. of K. Sigebert d. 757 [62] rinc (OE) [63] sweordplega (OE) [64] sword (L) [65] rihtwisnys (OE) [66] cwen (OE) [67] ides (OE) [68] leof (OE) [69] hræw, gefrætwe, frea (OE) [70] unwrenc (OE) [71] heahengel (OE) [72] St. Wystan d. 850; K. Wiglaf d. 840; K. Beorhtwulf acc. 840; K. Ceolwulf I acc. 821 [73] little ones (OE) [74] Orosius bk. v [75] freond (OE) [76] wer and wif, leof, hlaford (OE) [77] ban of minum banum, bearn (OE) [78] warlord (OE) [79] sunu (OE) [80] hlæfdige (OE) [81] Luke 2:35 [82] dohtor, modor (OE)



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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. Epandun: 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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