

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

## The Lytle War



*"You're tonsured," taunted Athulf's youngest son,  
"like Childeric the Frank, monasticized,  
with papal leave, like short-snouted Pippin..."*

by [William Carpenter](#) (April 2022)

*Under siege, the Danes debate their next move. Alfred and his chiefs hold a like discussion. They meet with the Danish leaders in no-man's-land. The Danes propose single combat between Guthrum and the ghostly Saxon leader.*

The waters you collected into seas  
bear many a vessel launched with noble hopes.  
Sometimes you supply a following gale,  
clear sailing under a cloudless tiled dome;  
but sometimes wayward breezes thwart our passage,  
incursions of the powers of the air,  
forcing us to beach on foreign sands;  
or buried shoals will tear away our keel  
and Aegir's daughters, hungry for new lords,  
will clutch the choking oarsmen to their dugs;  
or veering squalls will whip the shredded web,  
whip flying sheets from the shying, plunging yard,  
and running seas pummel the straining sides  
till nails pinning pine strakes to ribs  
of oak work loose, and pitch and hair work loose,  
and biting brine pours in, a load like lead,  
swamping the stogged hull, goading the hands  
to heave the cargo, even their blood-bought loot,  
into the smoking hollows shot with foam.

Then men mistrust the steersman who has failed[\[1\]](#)  
to slip their hides past your unsleeping eye.  
They look around to see which passenger,  
which fellow farer wears the mark of Cain;  
they search the hold, they search their shipmates' eyes  
for some ill criminal to glut your fury,  
when all you hunger for, dear Thunderer,  
is every man's unmoored, unguarded heart,  
that every man might harbor in your bosom.

Seven days and nights of cold and rain  
reflooded Parrett mouth and drowned the moors.[\[2\]](#)  
The rowers' stores were gone, their fodder gone,

and men were hacking shards from barracks timbers  
to broil horseflesh. Worse, the Saxon trolls  
(or were they Welsh?), laboring out of bowshot,  
had trained off the stream that fed the fort.

In council, Gormr, features drawn, declared,  
“We’ve sent out writs to fetch our absent friends.  
I say we wait, for now, to see who shows.  
The grip of Alfred’s God weighs heavy on us.[\[3\]](#)  
Attack now, we’ll squander half our might  
while Wulfhere watchdogs the royal throne.”[\[4\]](#)

“Respectfully,” said Wiga, Sigfred’s friend,[\[5\]](#)  
“Our numbers double theirs, not reckoning  
the Danes’ superiority in battle.  
But while the Saxons feast beyond these walls,  
our people yield to fever, cramps, and dread—  
all night, they hear the troll-steeds mourn our fallen.”[\[6\]](#)

Gormr acknowledged Theodric, who asked,  
“What if we fled by night, screened by a feint  
at the clear spring that sweetens Down End pill?  
With speed, we’d reappear in Chippenham  
before Lord Wulfhere knew we’d left this refuge.”

Their leader studied his surviving steersmen.[\[7\]](#)  
He missed young Ymme’s lord, his loyalty.  
He missed Siward’s truthfulness and strength,  
and Harald’s, for whose sake he’d launched this struggle.[\[8\]](#)  
He felt his soul had fled with his dead boy’s  
or that it called for him through all nine worlds.[\[9\]](#)

“Ne,” said Gorm, “this force, this staggered legion  
is all our strength, our kingdom, and our hope.  
We must not risk our costly gains to date  
on a rash sally, a mad dash to Wiltshire.  
You forget, these West Saxons purchase peace,  
unlike their unyielding ancestors.”[\[10\]](#)

And you forget what happened to us here  
on Polden ridge, the visionary awe  
that mastered us, some cunning man's strong spell  
or something wholly irresistible,  
a demonstration by their Victory-God.[\[11\]](#)  
Rally your rowers. Each of them, though ill,  
is worth a dozen Christian husbandmen."[\[12\]](#)

Escorting Godfred's grandson to his hut,  
Earl Hrut, his senior counselor, observed,  
"Our Jutlanders suspect the Saxon lady,  
the snow-white foreign frow you carted here,  
your prisoner or your hostage or your bride,  
has unmanned you with her foreign glamour.[\[13\]](#)  
They say she raised the corpse of her late lord.[\[14\]](#)  
You run the risk she'll stick you in your sleep,  
as Rosamund the Gepid stuck the Lombard  
after he made her drain the toasting cup  
his craftsmen fashioned from her father's skull."[\[15\]](#)

"Fear not," said Gormr, waving his bare hand,  
"She's Mercian, as you said. A Jutlander.  
She needs me to install her cub as king."[\[16\]](#)  
The northern chieftain ducked into the hut.

Next morning, when fresh pickets had been set,  
young Alfred mustered all his men in hope  
of stemming the effusion of desertions.  
Food and fuel were short, men missed their homes,  
and Somersetans feared Froda would fall  
on Athelney and massacre their families.  
Ingeld's seed, aware he must inspire  
his worn compatriots to hold their ground,  
remembered holy Gregory's instruction  
on governing diversities of men.[\[17\]](#)  
The Lord God alone, the *Heahgæst*  
that blazed on holy heads, hirsute and bald,  
in David's city, in that roaring room,

could find the words to fortify his levy  
against their starving, unforgiving foes.[\[18\]](#)  
But just as Alfred mounted the low stool,  
young Athelm, Wiltshire's junior alderman[\[19\]](#)  
beckoned to him, begging for a word.

"Lord," he said almost inaudibly,  
"my lord's lady's here, in Godrum's loc.[\[20\]](#)  
Your daughter's with her. Solemn Athelflaed."  
He said no more. The Saxon chief stared through him,  
as if he saw two spirits watching, standing  
small and precise, on Godfred's grandson's shoulders.[\[21\]](#)

"*Hæfdingas*, companions," Alfred cried,  
"our *Heahgod* has granted us the victory,[\[22\]](#)  
for he alone dismayed the pagan Danes  
and drove them tumbling headlong down the ridge,  
where scores of corpses feed the birds and wolves.  
Our trickery, our spirit, came from him.[\[23\]](#)  
Shall we pull back and let the Danes retreat  
because we lack the pluck to finish them?  
My faithful friends, you've weathered this campaign."[\[24\]](#)

"To Athelney!" men shouted, "Athelney!"  
and Athelred's successor understood[\[25\]](#)  
his army's banked, smoldering heat was fading.

"Your women and your children," cried the *cyning*,  
"are on the chopping block, and so are mine![\[26\]](#)  
My darling Edward's kenneled on our island,  
while Ealhswith, sweet intellect incarnate,[\[27\]](#)  
is old Gormr's prisoner in that fort!"  
He waved an arm, widely, weakly, behind him.

"Old Gormr's whore!" a coarse *beorn* charged.[\[28\]](#)  
The king fell silent, and a silence fell  
on all the Saxon churls, monks, and thanes.  
Only the homely birds pursued their music,

connubial whinchats weaving their low nests,  
buntings hectoring their brooding brides,[\[29\]](#)  
and out of sight, among the sodden tents,  
interpreting between the Son and Father,  
two steel-plumed, purple-gorgeted doves,  
*tu culuftran* or *cuscutan*, in Saxon.[\[30\]](#)  
Perpetually renewing vernal hymns,  
these avians laced the smoky air with prayers  
beyond the sphere of men, just as the choirs  
at Glastonbury and great Ambersbury,  
Ambrosius Aurelianus' home,[\[31\]](#)  
sang all day every day, all night each night,  
tendering him who made the angelic host[\[32\]](#)  
and made all flying things our debt of love.

Without a word, the king stretched out his hand.  
Athelnoth stood next to him, and Garulf,  
who handed Athelnoth his horn-tipped bow  
and a smooth shaft capped with whetted iron.  
The seed of Ingeld nocked the black-fledged missile,  
the throng dividing like the piled tides  
before the Prophet's rod, uncurtaining  
thin-bearded Finn, a fighting Wiltshireman.  
The *stræl* struck him through the throat, and Finn,[\[33\]](#)  
dazed and swaying where he stood, dribbled red  
blood from his lips and choked. Sickened, Alfred  
rammed the arm at Athelnoth and said,[\[34\]](#)

"We will not flee to Athelney, companions.[\[35\]](#)  
Nor will we squander blood and life and hope,  
rushing the ditch like stampeding lambs.  
All Somerset, all Wessex is our larder,  
and we may harvest all our Lord affords  
while gaunt marauders gnaw their horses' ribs.[\[36\]](#)  
We've cut their water, just as Hezekiah  
stopped up the streams around Jerusalem,  
afflicting the Assyrians with thirst.[\[37\]](#)

We've sent for Berkshire's and for Devon's levies.  
Deserters will be hanged.[\[38\]](#) We'll win this war  
by the Lord Creator's sole grace and favor."[\[39\]](#)  
The gathering dispersed, dissatisfied,  
but understanding who was in command.

King Alfred, Athelnoth, and Athelheah  
set out to walk the pickets' outer ring.  
"We should be gone from here in seven days,"  
said Ingeld's son, still trembling, to his friends.  
"Not everyone, dear bishop, can survive,  
come springtime, on his last winter's *fætnys*."[\[40\]](#)  
His fellows laughed as churls turned their heads,  
eager to share a feeble ray of cheer.

Another week of rain had chilled the troops  
when game Deormod, red-faced and soaked,  
entered Godrum's *tabernaculum*,  
which Alfred, now triumphant, occupied.[\[41\]](#)

"*Frea*," said Deormod, the limpid drops  
that trimmed his cheeks mimicking sad tears,  
"our scouts report an army fast approaching  
Bridgwater from the south. Five hundred strong."[\[42\]](#)

A burden pressed the worn commander's chest.  
"Fetch Athelheah," he said, "and Athelnoth."  
"So we fight, flee, or come to hurried terms,"  
he said when they were seated in his presence.

"Attack," said Athelnoth, "it's not too late.  
But first detach a force to hold the bridge."[\[43\]](#)

"Bring Godrum here to bargain," said the bishop,  
"and when you give the word, we'll cut him down."[\[44\]](#)

"*Ia*, we owe poor Finn," the king declared,  
"and all who bought this lodgment with their blood.  
We'll bet on both approaches, and our *Beorn*."[\[45\]](#)

*La, Heahgod, la, Hælend*, guard your sons  
from Satan and the pagan mariners.[\[46\]](#)  
Defend your sworn friends, who oppose your foes,  
from bloodlust, which the enemy employs  
to lure men who love your name to sin.[\[47\]](#)  
The thane of Somerton and Sherborne's ruler[\[48\]](#)  
led Sceaƿ's scion and a score of swords  
through the east-facing gate of their trenched billet  
and up the gentle slope to no-man's-land.  
The Athulfing, his features hot with soot,  
recognized old Gorm and his supporters  
as they descended the elf-shining lea,  
accompanied by twenty mailed Danes.[\[49\]](#)

The embassies stopped short, some rods apart,  
and Jutish Hrut and Aldhelm's eighth successor  
stepped forward, each to state his army's terms.[\[50\]](#)  
Each legate had lost kinsmen. Each had led  
to death men who'd trusted in his care,  
but each was trusted by his peers to master  
his hatred and assert the nation's will.[\[51\]](#)

"The Saxon bear emerges from his lair,"  
the Jutlander began, "to lead a crew  
of starveling thieves too poor to wear a sword.  
If Your Grace hates their gruel, our ring-giver[\[52\]](#)  
will gladly share his roast stag and boar  
to resurrect your famed episcopal girth.  
You called this conference. What will these knaves pay  
to ransom their doomed limbs from Frankish steel?"[\[53\]](#)

The prelate saw and raised Hrut's mockery.  
"With reverence," he said, "for Hrut's clear spirit,  
unclouded by the fumes of meat and mead,  
the West Saxons offer peace as follows:[\[54\]](#)  
the Danes shall quit this kingdom for all time,  
give hostages, return their prisoners,  
and for their own souls' benefit, not ours,



consent to serve our everliving Savior.”

The earl, granting nothing with his eyes,  
disclosed the rowers’ opening position.  
“I hope my lords enjoyed their fantasy  
of safety and unending, unchecked power.  
First, you’ll pay a thousand silver pounds  
*bot* and *wite* for this beggarly riot; [\[55\]](#)  
second, you’ll pledge loyalty to our throne;  
and third, you will disband this pack of thieves,  
as vile as Tunni’s slave host or the black  
slave rout that thrashed the Persian caliph. [\[56\]](#)  
If Somerset lies quiet for a year,  
you may select a Saxon alderman,  
yourself or Athelnoth, or that burnt ghost.”

The churchman was diverted by the patter  
of rapid hoofbeats hurrying from the camp.  
A messenger despatched across the river?  
Had Froda’s horse already forced the bridge? [\[57\]](#)

Both headmen huddled with their countrymen,  
then both without delay regained mid-field,  
Lord Athelheah hauling a mottled sack.  
He drew a mass therefrom and held it up.

Purpling with fury, Hrut declared,  
“Lord Froda’s noble blood will blast this land.  
You err, priest, in publishing this crime.” [\[58\]](#)

The bishop handed Hrut the bearded shape,  
then thrust his arm in the sack’s mouth and seized  
a second trophy by its red-gold cable.

The jarl jeered. “Who claims his due reward  
for ridding Gorm of this swaggering clog?  
King Hrothulf of the Heruli attacked  
the Lombards merely to mend his misprised manhood. [\[59\]](#)  
He lost his helm, his standard, and his life.

Our state is now the steadier, distraited."

Athelheah conveyed the second head—  
high Halga's seed, in case you hadn't twigged—  
dug in his bag again, and hoisted high  
a clotted bundle of black matted locks  
that half-concealed hurts to cheeks and nose [\[60\]](#)  
that all-revealing time would never heal.

"You persecute us Jutlanders," said Hrut,  
as coldly as our risen Lord, on doomsday, [\[61\]](#)  
will sentence those who scorned his sovereignty,  
"although we placed a Christian on our throne  
and made the Christian emperor our ally. [\[62\]](#)  
Lord Wan was our War-Father's faithful thane,  
a votary, like Starkad, of the ways  
of our plain-living, godly ancestors. [\[63\]](#)  
This relic that you flaunt will draw the rage  
of Woden on your West Saxon vermin." [\[64\]](#)

"Lord Toca has surrendered," Sherborne's lord  
replied, unwilted by the leader's heat. [\[65\]](#)  
"Our purpose to redeem your people stands."  
He proffered Wan's grim legacy. [\[66\]](#) The earl  
secured it with his wrists against his chest.  
Again the two ambassadors turned back,  
Hrut with three heads, the bishop with his sack.

"My lords," shrilled Hrut from among the earls,  
his voice half-muted by intruding gulls,  
"the former kings would spare their folk from war  
by staking a campaign on one sole champion. [\[67\]](#)  
Forget this paltry trading. Fiolnir's priest [\[68\]](#)  
will fight your one-eyed Christian troll alone.  
He owes you southerners one death at least  
for murdering his boy, his only son." [\[69\]](#)

The Saxon masters turned to Athulf's seed. [\[70\]](#)

"A Danish dodge, no doubt," said Athelnoth.

"I say we gore old Gorm, as we agreed."

King Alfred probed a cloud with his blue eye.  
"We do not fear their stratagems," he said,[\[71\]](#)  
"which our hatred pierces like clear air.  
Nor do we fear their weapons or their gods.[\[72\]](#)  
Companions, there's a summons from the Spirit[\[73\]](#)  
in Godrum's unconvincing invitation.  
Tell the criminals we'll take their challenge[\[74\]](#)  
but only if they swear to serve our Savior,  
should he deliver me from heathen steel."

The fiends agreed. A level ground was marked  
with hazel wands between the hostile works.  
When the foes faced each other, Gormr saw[\[75\]](#)  
a charcoaled, one-eyed demon, Mervyn's ghost,  
who called to mind, again, King Athulf's runt—  
while Alfred saw a grizzled people's chief,  
on whose broad shoulders seemed to perch the figures,  
remote and small and clear, of his dear *domina*  
and their dear *filia*, her diminished image.[\[76\]](#)

"Prepare your soul, devil," Alfred said,  
"to join your heathen ancestors in Hades,  
where you shall feel the fallen angels' forks—" [\[77\]](#)

"I've heard that burden," said the northerner,  
"but who are you to threaten heaven's wrath?  
My servant Mervyn? Damned Alfred's phantom,[\[78\]](#)  
come to avenge his shame on living men?"

Like lightning traveling from east to west,  
the seed of Ingeld launched a storm of strokes,  
which Godrum, backing, parried with his blade.  
The Saxon recognized the clanging ring  
of Offa's gift, from Charles, of Hunnish steel,[\[79\]](#)  
and recognized the cunning of a foe

who meant to husband fighting strength and breath—[\[80\]](#)  
or had the Healer humbled Harald's sire, [\[81\]](#)  
dulled him with hunger, harried him with grief?  
A feint at Godrum's eyes brought up his buckler,  
which Alfred used to screen a kneeward sweep,  
but the fiend hitched and wheeled to his right.

They separated, each to catch his breath,  
and each to hear, in his own thumping blood,  
the martial thunder of the Lord of Hosts,  
whom men have known as Mars or wounded Tiw,  
how he collected in each soul the tale  
of dread at failing those who needed him,  
of grief at losing those few that he loved,  
of joy to own the honor of the fight  
in sight of men and deathless ancestors—  
in sight of Christ himself, who would decide  
whom to spare and who would burn forever—  
and yet, as men mark off a fighting ground  
with sticks or stones, excluding friend and foe,  
how he relieves the swordsman's mind of all  
the joy and grief and dread that burden him  
and bids him meditate his fatal craft  
as though his thrusts and blocks were heartfelt prayers.

Again the men exchanged quick testing strokes  
and sudden flights of dragon-patterned blades  
as each endeavored to provoke his rival  
to waste his strength in angry, empty blows.  
They fought, and Godfred's scion drew first blood  
incising Alfred's thigh, but he replied  
with a quick flick that nicked the oarsman's ear.  
The long moments passed, and having spent  
long days in the field, on irregular fare,  
each *guma* glimpsed the bottom of his cup [\[82\]](#)  
and the frail thread of dregs that beckoned there.  
Then each lord's allies, knowing that their portions

hung on their representative's success,  
began to shout, drowning the shrieking steel—  
from which the fencers took less heart and vim  
than respite from the imminence of death.[\[83\]](#)

Then Gorm bungled a stroke that should have struck.  
Alfred, drawn by a feint at his left knee,  
flung his shield down, opening up  
his left arm, shoulder, cheek, and temple,[\[84\]](#)  
but Offa's weapon whistled overhead.  
Had the Lord jogged his arm, or had the sailor  
gone high to expiate his heinous sins?  
The Dane's shaded eyes and sagging features[\[85\]](#)  
said nothing of his spiritual state.

By mutual consent, the combatants  
regained the peaceful boundary of the field.  
Both bled, both blew, hearts hammered in both breasts  
as cupbearers brought them bread and beer.[\[86\]](#)

"Can Alfred hear me?" Godfred's grandson called,  
"from where he perches now, in purgatory?  
Pure pride pushed him to disperse his troops  
and post himself, exposed, in Chippenham.  
This troll or bogey here will not prevent  
the consummation of his failed reign,  
which is to see his people kneel to Grim."[\[87\]](#)

Sufficiently refreshed, the Saxon chief  
attacked across the ring, enveloping  
the fiend in a bright whirlwind of steel.  
Defending, counterstanding, to a pitch,  
Gormr recalled how Starkad searched the earth  
for someone worthy of the sober work  
of disencumbering him of evil deeds  
amassed across three lives of common men,  
such as the gibbeting of his own king,  
ring-giving Wicarus, at Grim's command.[\[88\]](#)

He parried, plodded, played for time, repaired  
his meager vigor while the Saxon toiled.  
As if by inspiration, he discerned  
the swinker's every swing before he swung.

Soon Ingeld's seed had so indulged his ire,[\[89\]](#)  
the robber's blocks forestalled his lagging stabs,  
which seeing, Godrum launched a fresh assault,  
subtracting additional fractions from his shield.  
Depleted, lacking sap to check the chap[\[90\]](#)  
and disconcerted by his blurting subjects,  
the Athulfing fled thrice around the fence  
and, hooted by his enemies, surrendered  
to horror such as Abraham endured  
the time nighttime's benightedness engulfed him.[\[91\]](#)  
Then Charles's gift to Offa whiffed his nape,  
and Sceaf's scion knew, with certainty,  
the sailor meant to liquidate his sins,  
or else the Lord, again, had turned his edge.[\[92\]](#)

Athelred's successor turned and stood  
face-to-face with the fiend, a fathom off.[\[93\]](#)  
Instructed by the Comforter, he bowed  
into the Dane, abandoning his brand,[\[94\]](#)  
and grappling with him, bore him to the ground.  
They wrestled in the grass, grunting and straining,  
and Alfred choked the ælf with bleeding fist,  
and beat his bleeding mouth and snout and eyes[\[95\]](#)  
but the tough devil bucked with fearsome force,  
the love of life implanted in each creature,  
and scrabbled, wan and weaponless, to safety.

"Lord," cried Wiga, who was Sigfred's spy,[\[96\]](#)  
"the drengs have brought refreshments! Come and drink!"

The fighters clambered to their feet and picked[\[97\]](#)  
with trembling fingers at their helmet strings.  
Swimming in sweat and blood, the pair inspired[\[98\]](#)

remorse among their men, both old and young,  
who ought to have come forward for their lords  
to fight as deputies or substitutes, [\[99\]](#)  
but shame and awe debarred their tardy offers.  
And rightly so: for in this *lytel* war,  
waged by wens who wagered their worn souls,  
their blood, their sovereignty, their peoples' fortunes  
on their right arms, their weapons, and their gods,  
only a lord who delved the purest ore  
could rightly seize, or yield, the victory-prize. [\[100\]](#)

Their mail-coats weighed on their molten limbs  
like stones bound to a man condemned to drowning. [\[101\]](#)  
Godfred's grandson shucked his clinking sheath  
and shocked his jarls with the awful sight  
of his uncovered bruised and bloody trunk,  
a barked boar bear's sad, manlike carcass, [\[102\]](#)  
as Alfred, like a snake sloughing its case,  
wriggled fitfully from ruptured rings  
and felt the salt breeze astringe his hurts.  
Without a word, he gripped his mottled bill,  
his grandfather's parting gift from Charles, [\[103\]](#)  
and entered on the island hemmed with wands  
where Eric's bane, brandishing his blade,  
prepared to bring the battle to an end. [\[104\]](#)

Bare as their ancestors, the pair converged,  
acclaimed by none but caroling yellowhammers. [\[105\]](#)  
The Saxon felt new valor fill his limbs,  
the *Beorn's* blessing on his blessed thane, [\[106\]](#)  
and roughly rushed the rugged alien,  
but Gormr jinked his onset, forced a parry,  
and purling rapidly, attacked his back.

The nib bit, and Alfred felt his blood  
ooze in a tepid runnel down his spine.  
He knew how brief an interval remained  
for him to spare his family and folk

from slavery and death at heathen hands.[\[107\]](#)  
He'd die for them right now, without a thought,  
but now his charge was not to die, but heal  
the people of this plague by bleeding one  
single vicious, unrepentant devil.  
The king rushed the rower yet again  
and passing, whipped his tip at Godrum's top.[\[108\]](#)  
The brunt would have blown his brains from their box  
had not the nimble knave canted his crown,  
but nonetheless the Saxon's lancet flayed[\[109\]](#)  
a flap of fell from the fiend's faltering poll,  
threading a row of rubies down one ear.

“You're tonsured,” taunted Athulf's youngest son,  
“like Childeric the Frank, monasticized,  
with papal leave, by short-snooted Pippin.”[\[110\]](#)  
The Saxon king did not complete his boast  
but fainting, failed, and woke at Godrum's feet,  
darkly, through his blinded eye, perceiving  
the blur of Offa's worm-dyed file-leaving  
fixing to pin his ribcage to the turf.[\[111\]](#)  
Writhing, Alfred wrapped the rower's shanks,  
shirking steel that slit his seeping side,[\[112\]](#)  
and—thinking, Now he's paid for all his crimes—  
levered the slippery brigand to his back.  
Just as he thumped the thirsty earth, the thurse,  
contorting to absorb the impetus,  
felt Alfred's greasy claws unclinch his grip  
and crib the Mercian monarch's gift from Charles.  
And now the bloody babe from Osburh's belly  
(that's Alfred, fruit of Jutish Oslac's girl)[\[113\]](#)  
straddled murdered Godfred's prostrate seed  
and pressed the weapon's neck to the thane's throat.[\[114\]](#)

“Grandfather Grim,” the seed of Ingeld growled,  
“frets where fiends exfoliate his hide.  
Will you surrender to your *Sigedryhten*?”[\[115\]](#)



When Alfred got but hard stares from his foe,  
he rolled the quaking balance of his weight  
forward against the edge that nipped the devil.  
He would have cut his gullet to the bone,  
avenging all the kings the fiends destroyed  
and all the Saxon spearmen bled in battle,  
but the nicked, lacquered implement he clenched  
between his bleeding fingers wouldn't budge—[\[116\]](#)  
(his bad eye caught a hand—he mashed it down)—  
nor would his joints or ligaments obey  
the urgent lust to push the steel home.

As if the Lord had dulled his sinful will  
or a *dry* droned a rune to blunt the blade, [\[117\]](#)  
the hilt halted, much as the Lombard's lingered  
over the nape of Sanctulus of Norcia, [\[118\]](#)  
and Alfred felt, beneath his sticky palm,  
the urgent legend graven in the metal,  
“go, sell your coat, and buy a sword”—  
*tunicam suam vendat, emat gladium*—[\[119\]](#)  
which Alcuin gilded as an allegory,  
interpreting the parable for Charles,  
the Lord's “sword” being his two-edged “word.”

So unlike rigorous Ingwar, who broke open  
Aella at York and Edmund after Hoxne; [\[120\]](#)  
unlike Theodoric the Ostrogoth,  
who clove King Odovacar as he supped  
and took his title, King of Italy  
(“He's boneless, men,” the princely killer quipped); [\[121\]](#)  
unlike deceitful Simeon and Levi,  
who drowned defiled Dinah's shame in blood; [\[122\]](#)  
and unlike Cain, who spilled his brother's life; [\[123\]](#)  
but just as anointed Saul the Benjamite  
acquitted the Amalekitish king,  
and David, Judah's heir, spared drooping Saul, [\[124\]](#)  
the seed of Ingeld spared King Godfred's spawn,

if only through the Lord's misericord.

"*Volo*," Godrum whispered timidly,[\[125\]](#)  
inaudibly to any but himself.  
"*\*Iak uil*," as if he'd seen a christening[\[126\]](#)  
and heard the baptizand pronounce his vows.  
"*Ic wille*," said less faintly than before,[\[127\]](#)  
"submit to Christ and serve him faithfully  
and lead my host under his light yoke."[\[128\]](#)  
He didn't utter all he had in mind.  
He didn't claim that Christ had ransomed Grim[\[129\]](#)  
or would do so when he renewed the world.  
He didn't ask whose helpmeet Ealhswith  
would be in the new earth of the Eighth Age  
or ask to be vouchsafed a Frankish bride  
or urge his long-held need to speak with Harald.[\[130\]](#)  
Nor did he remonstrate with Athulf's seed  
for muddying his soul with ugly hate—  
such thoughts were likely snares laid by the devil.[\[131\]](#)

The Saxon stared, uncertain what he'd heard.  
He leaned, he heaved, he thrust, he punched, he plunged;  
he jolted, jerked, and jumped, to no avail.  
King Eric's bane, a lightness in his breast,[\[132\]](#)  
despite the weight of Alfred crashing on him,  
desiring to pursue the thing, declared,  
"We'll yield, deed, and quit these western hills  
to regain the agreeable Anglian fens."  
The seed of Ingeld failed to reply.  
"We offer peace," the northmen's chief affirmed.[\[133\]](#)  
"What will you give to sweeten our submission?"

Young Alfred recollected Godrum's oath,  
sworn on his ring and swiftly disavowed.[\[134\]](#)  
He recollected treacherous Exeter,[\[135\]](#)  
the pact of peace they'd pledged, repealed, struck  
the night the Persians hailed David's *nefa*.[\[136\]](#)  
But Gormr grinned, and Alfred knew his man.

Though Saxon counselors would look askance[\[137\]](#)  
at bargaining away King Edmund's *regnum*,  
the king saw merit in the devil's tender.

"The Anglian nation craves a Christian *cyning*,"  
he said. "You shall be baptized with your men  
and proceed hence to East Anglian lands.  
Return your prisoners, but keep your loot—  
we know a shepherd needs to feed his sheep.[\[138\]](#)  
Our *Heahfrea* will correct your sins[\[139\]](#)  
as he has punished ours so grievously,  
but he will never spurn or swindle you."

Contented with the running tide of grace,  
the sailor smiled, and his smashed face shone  
as Alfred backed the wrecked edge from his neck.  
"I know this peace is good," said Godfred's seed,  
"approved by Athelnoth and Sherborne's lord  
and Saxon sailormen and mead-bench bears—  
for you are Athulf's boy, restored to men."[\[140\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) \*sturman (OE)

[\[2\]](#) \*rægn, \*miurar (OE)

[\[3\]](#) \*krib, \*Kup (OE)

[\[4\]](#) \*maht, \*kunukr, \*stal (OE)

[\[5\]](#) \*uinr (OE)

[\[6\]](#) \*liupir, \*hesta flahpa (OE)

[\[7\]](#) \*stilir, \*sturnmin (OE)

[\[8\]](#) \*Sikurpr, \*Haraltr, \*kab (OE)

[\[9\]](#) Guthrum's s.; \*niu haimar (OE)

[\[10\]](#) \*Uestsaksar (OE)

[\[11\]](#) \*Siktiur (OE)

[\[12\]](#) \*repar, \*Kristn (OE)

[\[13\]](#) \*froia, \*snaehoitu snot, \*hafta, \*kisl, \*kuin (OE)

[\[14\]](#) \*nar (OE)

[\[15\]](#) \*Lakbarp, \*sumbl kalkan, \*fapur (OE); K. Alboin d. 573;

K. Cunimund d. 567

- [16] \*kunukr (0E)
- [17] geleodas, larboding (0E)
- [18] Holy Ghost (0E); Acts 2:2-4; fyrð, fa (0E)
- [19] ealdormann (0E)
- [20] hlaford (0E); compound (0E)
- [21] sawla (0E)
- [22] High God (0E)
- [23] searu (0E)
- [24] freondas (0E)
- [25] æftergenga (0E)
- [26] wifmenn, cildru (0E)
- [27] gesceadwisnys (0E)
- [28] hero (0E)
- [29] nest, bryde (0E)
- [30] doves, ringdoves (0E)
- [31] British chief, late 5th c.
- [32] þreat (0E)
- [33] arrow (0E)
- [34] cwæp (0E)
- [35] geferan (0E)
- [36] spechus, wicg (0E)
- [37] 2 Chron. 32:3-4
- [38] hereflyman (0E)
- [39] Ordfruma (0E)
- [40] fat (0E)
- [41] ren, truman, georn (0E); tent (L); oferswipend (0E)
- [42] Lord (0E); tearas (0E); fif hund (0E)
- [43] brycg (0E)
- [44] word (0E)
- [45] hero (0E)
- [46] High God, Savior (0E); ealipend (0E)
- [47] freondas, fa, deofol, synn (0E)
- [48] þegn (0E); rector (L)
- [49] ælfscienene leah (0E)
- [50] bp. of Sherborne; here (0E)
- [51] deap, þeod (0E)

- [52] \*riktrifr (0E)
- [53] \*stal (0E)
- [54] friþ (0E)
- [55] \*þusinn, \*pund, \*bot, \*uiti (0E)
- [56] crushed by K. Froda 6th c.; Zanj Revolt 869–883
- [57] \*Fruþa (0E)
- [58] \*brestr (0E)
- [59] \*Ruulf (0E); 508; \*Lakbarþi (0E)
- [60] hleor, nosu (0E)
- [61] \*tumstakr (0E)
- [62] K. Harald Klak; Emp. Louis; \*kristn (0E)
- [63] \*Ualfapur, \*þiakn (0E); Saxo bk. vi
- [64] \*Open (0E)
- [65] wisa (0E)
- [66] laf (0E)
- [67] Saxo bk. iv; \*kabi, \*kuþi (0E)
- [68] Woden
- [69] \*suprmæn, \*lif, \*mogr, \*sunr (0E)
- [70] Æþulfs sæd (0E)
- [71] searu (0E)
- [72] wæpen, godu (0E)
- [73] gesithas (0E)
- [74] sceaðan (0E)
- [75] fa (0E)
- [76] þeodguma, ides, dohtor (0E)
- [77] sawul, deofol, hæðen, forcan (0E)
- [78] \*traukr (0E)
- [79] K. Offa of Mercia, acc. 757
- [80] eafop (0E)
- [81] Hælend (0E)
- [82] man (0E)
- [83] deap (0E)
- [84] earm, ceacban, þunwange (0E)
- [85] hleor (0E)
- [86] byreleas, beor (0E)
- [87] \*Krimr (0E)
- [88] Saxo bks. vi, viii

- [\[89\]](#) irre (0E)
- [\[90\]](#) secg (0E)
- [\[91\]](#) Gen. 15:12; þeostru (0E)
- [\[92\]](#) lida, ecg (0E)
- [\[93\]](#) æftergenga, fæþm (0E)
- [\[94\]](#) brand (0E)
- [\[95\]](#) wraxledon, gærse, elf, muþ, nebb, eagan (0E)
- [\[96\]](#) \*hæra, \*Uiki, \*Sihfriþr (0E)
- [\[97\]](#) cempa (0E)
- [\[98\]](#) swat (0E)
- [\[99\]](#) speliend (0E)
- [\[100\]](#) sawla, blod, cynedom, folca sælpa, wæpen, osas, sigelean (0E)
- [\[101\]](#) hringlocan (0E)
- [\[102\]](#) \*biarntiur (0E)
- [\[103\]](#) bill (0E); K. Ecgbert acc. 802 d. 839
- [\[104\]](#) \*bani (0E); beadu (0E)
- [\[105\]](#) ealdoras (0E)
- [\[106\]](#) ellen (0E); hero (0E); þegn (0E)
- [\[107\]](#) þeowdom (0E)
- [\[108\]](#) reþra, copp (0E)
- [\[109\]](#) æderseax (0E)
- [\[110\]](#) K. Childeric dep. 751; K. Pippin acc. 751
- [\[111\]](#) wyrmfah fela laf, turf (0E)
- [\[112\]](#) side (0E)
- [\[113\]](#) belg (0E); Alfred's gdf.
- [\[114\]](#) þegn, þrotu (0E)
- [\[115\]](#) Victory-Lord (0E)
- [\[116\]](#) betwux, fingras (0E)
- [\[117\]](#) mage (0E)
- [\[118\]](#) Gregory, *Dialogues*
- [\[119\]](#) Luke 22:36
- [\[120\]](#) 867; 870
- [\[121\]](#) 493
- [\[122\]](#) Gen. 34:25-29
- [\[123\]](#) Gen. 4:8
- [\[124\]](#) 1 Sam. 15:9; 1 Sam. 24:4, 269

- [\[125\]](#) I will (L)
- [\[126\]](#) (OE)
- [\[127\]](#) (OE)
- [\[128\]](#) \*lip (OE)
- [\[129\]](#) \*Krimr (OE)
- [\[130\]](#) Guthrum's s.
- [\[131\]](#) \*sap, \*fiati (OE)
- [\[132\]](#) \*bani (OE)
- [\[133\]](#) \*fripr (OE)
- [\[134\]](#) Wareham 876
- [\[135\]](#) Exanceaster (OE)
- [\[136\]](#) descendant (OE)
- [\[137\]](#) ealdras (OE)
- [\[138\]](#) hierde (OE)
- [\[139\]](#) High-Lord (OE)
- [\[140\]](#) \*skibara, \*siotulbirnir, \*barn, \*men (OE)

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