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THE MIDDLE AGES

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- On my cell wall here,
 His sight fixes. Burning.
 15 Searching. My old eyes peer
 At new learning.
- His delight when his claws
 Close on his prey
 Equals mine, when sudden clues
 20 Light my way.
- So we find by degrees
 Peace in solitude,
 Both of us—solitaries—
 Have each the trade
- 25 He loves. Pangur, never idle
 Day or night
 Hunts mice. I hunt each riddle
 From dark to light

Writing in the Wood¹

- Overwatched by woodland wall
 merles make melody full well;
 above my book—lined, lettered—
 birds twittered a soothing spell.
- 5 Cuckoos call clear—fairest phrase—
 cloaked in grays, from leafy leas.
 Lord's love, what blessings show' ring!
 Good to write 'neath tow' ring trees.

The Viking Terror¹

Bitter is the wind to-night,
 It tosses the ocean's white hair:
 To-night I fear not the fierce warriors of Norway
 Coursing on the Irish Sea.

The Old Woman of Beare¹

The ebbing that has come on me
 is not the ebbing of the sea.
 What knows the sea of grief or pain?—
 Happy tide will flood again.

1. Translated by Ruth P. M. Lehmann. This translation aims to reproduce much of the complex internal rhyme and end-rhyme, assonance, and alliteration of the original; it takes minor liberties with the literal sense.

1. Translated by Kuno Meyer.

1. Translated by James Carney. The speaker's name,

"caillech," "veiled one," can mean old woman, hag, widow, and nun. The hag figure has resonance with teachers of crafts and wisdom, as well as early mythic female figures of sovereignty and initiation, rejuvenated when they are embraced by a chosen hero.

Then distraught in mind they threw down their weapons; demoralized they went scurrying away in flight. The nation magnified in strength attacked them in the rear until the greatest part of the army lay on the field of victory levelled by battle, hacked by swords, as a treat for the wolves and a joy to the carrion-greedy birds. Those who survived fled from the linden spears of their foes. In their wake advanced the troop of Hebrews, honoured with the victory and glorified in the judgment: the Lord God, the almighty Lord, had come handsomely to their aid. Swiftly then with their gleaming swords those valiant heroes made an inroad through the thick of their foes; they hacked at targes and sheared through the shield-wall. The Hebrew spear-throwers were wrought up to the fray; the soldiers lusted mightily after a spear-contest on that occasion. There in the dust fell the main part of the muster-roll of the Assyrian nobility, of that odious race. Few survivors reached their native land.

The soldiers of royal renown turned back in retirement amidst carnage and reeking corpses. That was the opportunity for the land's in-dwellers to seize from those most odious foes, their old dead enemies, bloodied booty, resplendent accoutrements, shield and broad sword, burnished helmets, costly treasures. The guardians of their homeland had honorably conquered their enemies on the battlefield and destroyed with swords their old persecutors. In their trail lay dead those who of living peoples had been most inimical to their existence.

Then the whole nation, most famous of races, proud, curled-locked, for the duration of one month were carrying and conveying into the beautiful city, Bethulia, helmets and hip-swords, gray mail-coats, and men's battle-dress ornamented with gold, more glorious treasures than any man among ingenious men can tell. All that the people splendidly gained, brave beneath their banners in the fray, through the shrewd advice of Judith, the courageous woman. As a reward the celebrated spear-men brought back for her from the expedition the sword and the bloodied helmet of Holofernes as well as his huge mail-coat adorned with red gold; and everything the ruthless lord of the warriors owned of riches or personal wealth, of rings and of beautiful treasures, they gave it to that beautiful and resourceful lady.

For all this Judith gave glory to the Lord of hosts who granted her esteem and renown in the realm of earth and likewise too a reward in heaven, the prize of victory in the glory of the sky because she always had true faith in the Almighty. Certainly at the end she did not doubt the reward for which she long had yearned.

For this be glory into eternity to the dear Lord who created the wind and the clouds, the skies and the spacious plains and likewise the cruel seas and the joys of heaven, through his peculiar mercy.



The Dream of the Rood

The Dream of the Rood is a remarkable tenth-century poem, a mystical dream vision whose narrator tells of his dream that the rood—Christ's cross—appeared to him and told the story of its unwilling role in the crucifixion. The poem is an excellent illustration of how the conventions of Old English heroic poems like *Beowulf* were adapted to the doctrines of Christianity. Christ's Passion is converted into a heroic sacrifice as the cross reports that it watched him—the young hero—strip himself naked, as if preparing for battle, and bravely ascend it. In the same vein, the cross presents itself as a thane (retainer) forced into disloyalty, as it watches—and participates in—the crucifixion, unable to avenge its beloved Lord.

In addition to heroic poetry, *The Dream of the Rood* recalls Old English genres such as the riddle and the elegy. In riddle fashion, the cross asks, "What am I?"—that started as a tree, became an instrument of torture, and am now a beacon of victory, resplendent with jewels. In the manner of elegies like *The Wanderer*, the speaker, stained with sin, presents himself as a lonely exile whose companions have left him and gone to heaven. After his vision, he resolves to seek the fellowship of his heavenly Lord and his former companions, which he pictures as taking place in a celestial mead hall: "the home of joy and happiness, / where the people of God are seated at the feast / in eternal bliss."

One of the most striking poetic effects of *The Dream of the Rood* is its focus on the Incarnation, God's taking on human flesh. The poet often juxtaposes references to Christ's humanity and divinity in the same line, thereby achieving a powerful effect of paradox, as when he tells of the approach of "the young warrior, God Almighty." It is noteworthy that the aspect of Christ's humanity which the poet stresses is the heroism rather than the pathos which was to become so prominent in later medieval poetry and art. This heroism provides a context for a cryptic passage at the end of the poem, where the dreamer refers to Christ's "journey" to bring "those who before suffered burning" victoriously to heaven. In *The Harrowing of Hell* (based on the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus), Christ heroically freed the virtuous Old Testament patriarchs from damnation and led them to eternal bliss.

The fame of *The Dream of the Rood* appears to have been widespread in its own time. Our knowledge of it comes from three sources: the huge stone Ruthwell Cross in southern Scotland built in the eighth century (on which a short version is inscribed in runic letters); the silver Brussels Cross, made in England in the tenth century; and the manuscript found written in Vercelli in northern Italy, also written in the tenth century—the only complete version of the poem. These varied locations are a testament to the wide influence of Anglo-Saxon scholars, not only in the British Isles but on the Continent as well.

The Dream of the Rood¹

Listen! I will describe the best of dreams
 which I dreamed in the middle of the night
 when, far and wide, all men slept.
 It seemed that I saw a wondrous tree
 5 soaring into the air, surrounded by light,
 the brightest of crosses; that emblem was entirely
 cased in gold; beautiful jewels
 were strewn around its foot, just as five
 studded the cross-beam. All the angels of God,
 10 fair creations, guarded it. That was no cross
 of a criminal, but holy spirits and men on earth
 watched over it there—the whole glorious universe.

Wondrous was the tree of victory, and I was stained
 by sin, stricken by guilt. I saw this glorious tree
 15 joyfully gleaming, adorned with garments,
 decked in gold; the tree of the Ruler
 was rightly adorned with rich stones;
 yet through that gold I could see the agony
 once suffered by wretches, for it had bled
 20 down the right hand side. Then I was afflicted,

1. Translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland.



The Ruthwell Cross, north side, top section, 7th–8th century. Preserved in a church in southern Scotland, this 18-foot stone cross is carved with many Christian scenes, including this depiction of Saint John the Baptist, bearded and holding the Lamb of God. The Latin inscription beneath the saint is written in runes—the traditional Germanic alphabet, used for ritualistic purposes. Runic inscriptions elsewhere on the cross reproduce portions of *The Dream of the Rood* in Old English. Still other inscriptions are in Latin and employ the Roman alphabet. Thus, like *The Dream of the Rood* itself, whose Christlike hero resembles a Germanic warrior, the Ruthwell Cross illustrates the fusion of Mediterranean and Germanic traditions in Anglo-Saxon Christian culture.

frightened at this sight; I saw that sign often change
 its clothing and hue, at times dewy with moisture,
 stained by flowing blood, at times adorned with treasure.
 Yet I lay there for a long while
 25 and gazed sadly at the Savior's cross
 until I heard it utter words;
 the finest of trees began to speak:
 "I remember the morning a long time ago
 that I was felled at the edge of the forest
 30 and severed from my roots. Strong enemies seized me,
 bade me hold up their felons on high,
 made me a spectacle. Men shifted me
 on their shoulders and set me on a hill.
 Many enemies fastened me there. I saw the Lord of Mankind
 35 hasten with such courage to climb upon me.
 I dared not bow or break there

against my Lord's wish, when I saw the surface
of the earth tremble. I could have felled
all my foes, yet I stood firm.

40 Then the young warrior, God Almighty,
stripped Himself, firm and unflinching. He climbed
upon the cross, brave before many, to redeem mankind.
I quivered when the hero clasped me,
yet I dared not bow to the ground,
45 fall to the earth. I had to stand firm.

A rood was I raised up; I bore aloft the mighty King,
the Lord of Heaven. I dared not stoop.

They drove dark nails into me; dire wounds are there to see,
the gaping gashes of malice; I dared not injure them.

50 They insulted us both together; I was drenched in the blood
that streamed from the Man's side after He set His spirit free.

"On that hill I endured many grievous trials;
I saw the God of Hosts stretched

55 on the rack; darkness covered the corpse
of the Ruler with clouds, His shining radiance.

Shadows swept across the land, dark shapes
under the clouds. All creation wept,
wailed for the death of the King; Christ was on the cross.

60 Yet men hurried eagerly to the Prince
from afar; I witnessed all that too.

I was oppressed with sorrow, yet humbly bowed to the hands of men,
and willingly. There they lifted Him from His heavy torment,
they took Almighty God away. The warriors left me standing there,
stained with blood; sorely was I wounded by the sharpness of spear-shafts.

65 They laid Him down, limb-weary; they stood at the corpse's head,
they beheld there the Lord of Heaven; and there He rested for a while,
worn-out after battle. And then they began to build a sepulchre;
under his slayers' eyes, they carved it from the gleaming stone,
and laid therein the Lord of Victories. Then, sorrowful at dusk,
70 they sang a dirge before they went, weary,
from their glorious Prince; He rested in the grave alone.

But we still stood there, weeping blood,
long after the song of the warriors
had soared to heaven; the corpse grew cold,
75 the fair human house of the soul. Then our enemies
began to fell us; that was a terrible fate.

They buried us in a deep pit; but friends
and followers of the Lord found me there
and girded me with gold and shimmering silver.

80 "Now, my loved man, you have heard
how I endured bitter anguish
at the hands of evil men. Now the time is come
when men far and wide in this world,
and all this bright creation, bow before me;

85 they pray to this sign. On me the Son of God
suffered for a time; wherefore I now stand on high,

glorious under heaven; and I can heal
all those who stand in awe of me.

90 Long ago I became the worst of tortures,
hated by men, until I opened
to them the true way of life.

Lo! The Lord of Heaven, the Prince of Glory,
honored me over any other tree
just as He, Almighty God, for the sake of mankind
95 honored Mary, His own mother,
before all other women in the world.

Now I command you, my loved man,
to describe your vision to all men;
tell them with words this is the tree of glory
100 on which the Son of God suffered once
for the many sins committed by mankind,
and for Adam's wickedness long ago.

He sipped the drink of death. Yet the Lord rose
with His great strength to deliver man.
105 Then He ascended into heaven. The Lord Himself,
Almighty God, with His host of angels,
will come to the middle-world again
on Domesday to reckon with each man.

Then He who has the power of judgment
110 will judge each man just as he deserves
for the way in which he lived this fleeting life.

No-one then will be unafraid
as to what words the Lord will utter.
Before the assembly, He will ask where that man is
115 who, in God's name, would undergo the pangs of death,
just as He did formerly upon the cross.

Then men will be fearful and give
scant thought to what they say to Christ.
But no-one need be numbed by fear
120 who has carried the best of all signs in his breast;
each soul that has longings to live with the Lord
must search for a kingdom far beyond the frontiers of this world."

Then I prayed to the cross, eager
and light-hearted, although I was alone
125 with my own poor company. My soul
longed for a journey, great yearnings
always tugged at me. Now my hope in this life
is that I can turn to that tree of victory
alone and more often than any other man
130 and honor it fully. These longings master
my heart and mind, and my help comes
from holy cross itself. I have not many friends
of influence on earth; they have journeyed on
from the joys of this world to find the King of Glory,
135 they live in heaven with the High Father,
dwell in splendor. Now I look day by day
for that time when the cross of the Lord,

which once I saw in a dream here on earth,
will fetch me away from this fleeting life
140 and lift me to the home of joy and happiness
where the people of God are seated at the feast
in eternal bliss, and set me down
where I may live in glory unending and share
the joy of the saints. May the Lord be a friend to me,
145 He who suffered once for the sins of men
here on earth on the gallows-tree.
He has redeemed us; He has given life to us,
and a home in heaven.

 Hope was renewed,
blessed and blissful, for those who before suffered burning.
150 On that journey the Son was victorious,
strong and successful. When He, Almighty Ruler,
returned with a thronging host of spirits
to God's kingdom, to joy among the angels
and all the saints who lived already
155 in heaven in glory, then their King,
Almighty God, entered His own country.