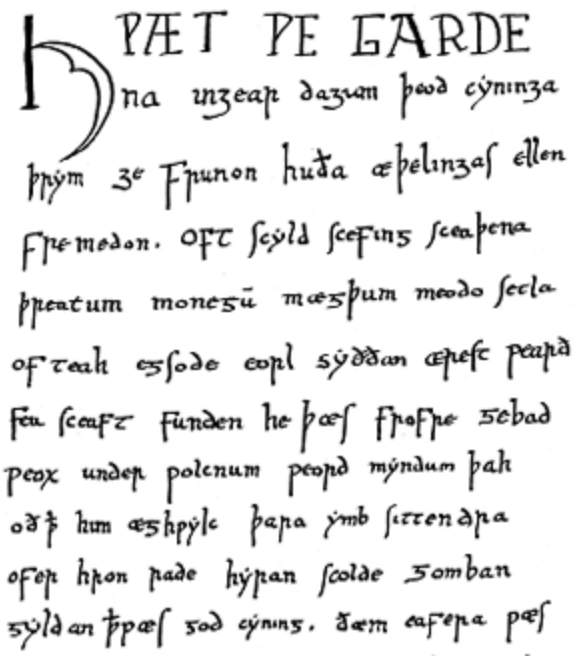
Paleography Exercise

On a separate sheet of paper, make a transcription of the text below. You might want to view a Sample Transcription

Sample Transcription

Using an Osmiroid or other commercial italic pen instead of a goose quill (you may of course attempt this exercise with an ordinary ballpoint pen, but you will lose much of the thick-thin contrast afforded by an italic pen), white paper in place of vellum, and ordinary washable black ink in place of carbon black and gall, try to copy the first eleven lines of the manuscript below, taking care to reproduce as best you can the form of the letters in the manuscript. You will have to experiment with different sequences of strokes to create some of the letters, such as "þ", "æ", and "ð". When you are done, compare your finished product with the sample transcription below.

HÆT ÞE GARDE
na inzeaþ dazum þeod cyninza
þrym ze frunon huða æþelinzaf ellen
fremedon oft scyld scefing sceaþena
þreatum monezu mæþum meodo setla
of teah esode eorl syþþan æriest wearþ
fea sceaft funden he þæs frofre zebad
wox under wolcnum weorð myndum þah
oð þ him æghwylc þara ymb sittendra
ofer hron rade hyran scolde zomban
zyldan þæt wæs zod cyninz. þæm eafera wæs



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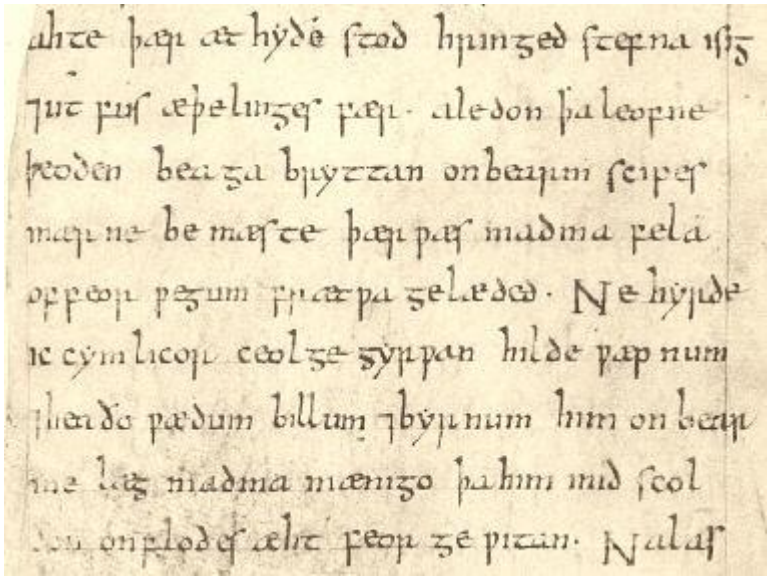
, and read a discussion of the issues involved in a creating a transcription.



ahte þæt æt hyðe stod hringed stefna ísig
ut fus æþelinzes fæt. aledon þa leofne
þeoden beaza bryttan onbeorum scipes
mæne be mæste þæt wæs madma mæla
oþþeor þegum þrymmum zeladed. Ne hyhte
ic cymlicor ceol ze zyrwan hilde wæpnum
ond heaðo wædum billum ond byrnum hyne on beorh
ne læz madma mæniz þa him mid stod
ofer onflodes æht feor ze fyrran. Nalas

Why Make a Transcription?

Most students, undergraduate or graduate, engaged in the study of Old English poetry have no opportunity to read these poems in their original manuscript context. The four great collections of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts containing Old English poetry reside in various modern-day scriptoria across England. It is difficult, if not impossible, for most students to gain access to these treasures. Although there exist fine facsimiles, microfiches, and microfilms of many of these manuscripts (and most recently superb resources such as Kevin Kiernan's *Electronic Beowulf* CD-ROM), no close examination of these items can replace the "direct and prolonged access," to use Kiernan's phrase (*Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, Rutgers University Press, 1981: xiii), to the manuscript needed to grasp fully the complexities of the poem's construction.

Nevertheless, a student can gain a tremendous amount of insight into *Beowulf* by studying closely a facsimile, such as the one found in Julius Zupitza's Early English Text Society volume. The image in the previous screen (i.e., the "Translation Exercise" page) is scanned from that volume. Perhaps the easiest and quickest way to gain a foothold in the poem is to "transcribe," or forge, a section of the poem. Below you will find an example of such a "transcription." The value of such an exercise is in the act of "copying" the letters, noticing how the scribe scratched each letter into the "body" of the manuscript (vellum is after all cowhide), the order in which the scribe drew each stroke of a given letter. These are invaluable lessons for a student of the poem, for they take the student beyond the immediate text (most often a translation) of the poem and the tyranny of modern poetic typographical conventions into the dim past of the cultural history of the poem.

In the first sentence of the most commonly read modern edition of the poem (ed. Frederick Klaeber), there can be found roughly twenty editorial intrusions, assumptions, emendations; some are founded on sound paleographic and prosodic principles, others are purely subjective. Thus, the first ten lines of the poem can serve as a laboratory in which to examine not only the script of the A-scribe (two scribes contributed to the Beowulf manuscript; the second scribe begins at line 1939b), but also some of the editorial conventions used by "modern" editors of the poem.

Using an Osmiroid or other commercial italic pen instead of a goose quill (you may of course attempt this exercise with an ordinary ballpoint pen, but you will lose much of the thick-thin contrast afforded by an italic pen), white paper in place of vellum, and ordinary washable black ink in place of carbon black and gall, try to copy the first eleven lines of the manuscript below, taking care to reproduce as best you can the form of the letters in the manuscript. You will have to experiment with different sequences of strokes

to create some of the letters, such as "þ", "æ", and "ð". When you are done, compare your finished product with the sample transcription below.

HÆT WE GARDE
na unzeap dazum þeod cynniza
þrym ze frunon huða æþelinzaſ ellen
fremedon. oft ſcyld ſcefinz ſceaþena
þreatum monezū maeſþum meodo ſecla
ofteah eſode eorl ſyððan æreſt weard
fea ſceaft funden he þæſ frofre zebad
weox under wolcnum weorð myndum þah
oð þ him æghwylc þara ymb ſitten dra
ofer hron rade hyran ſcolde zomban
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You may want to look each of the words in this passage up in the Glossary and create your own "literal" translation of the passage. Having gone to the trouble to create your own literal translation of the passage, you will find writing the essay below easier.

Click here to open a fill-in form in which you will type the translation of these same lines from an acceptable text. (For a list of translations, click here to go to the Links page.) In the dialog box, you will find enough space to write a 3-5 paragraph essay on one of the issues this particular passage and its translation raises. Some of these issues might include:

1. use of mid-line caesura
2. prose vs. poetry
3. archaic language vs. modernized language
4. use of invocatory word (or words)
5. contorted syntax

Be sure to remember to turn in your transcription exercise to the instructor after you've submitted the essay assignment electronically.