

I: Migration and Conversion

The decline of Roman Britain and the coming of the Saxons

[1] Roman ruins in the medieval landscape

Wrætlic is þes wealstan, wyrde gebræcon;
burgstede burston, broснаð enta geweorc.
Hrofas sind gehrorene, hreorge torras,
hrungeat berofen, hrim on lime,
scearde scurbeorge scorene, gedrorene,
ældo undereotone. Eorðgrap hafað
waldend wyrhtan forweorone, geleorene,
heardgripe hrusan, oþ hund cnea
werþeoda gewitan.

[Wondrous is this stone wall, smashed by fate.
The buildings have crumbled, the work of giants decays.
Roofs have collapsed, the towers in ruin,
The frosted gate is unbarred, hoar-frost on mortar,
The storm-protection mutilated, cut down, declined,
Undermined by age. The earth's grip holds
The powerful makers, decayed, passed away,
The hard grasp of the earth, until a hundred generations
Of the nation of men have passed away.]

The Ruin (Exeter Book), ll. 1–9a, translated by Elaine Treharne (2010)

[2] Gildas on the arrival of the Germanic tribes into the British Isles

Then all the councillors, together with that proud tyrant Gurthrigern [Vortigern], the British king, were so blinded, that, as a protection to their country, they sealed its doom by inviting in among them (like wolves into the sheep-fold), the fierce and impious Saxons, a race hateful both to God and men, to repel the invasions of the northern nations. [...] They (the Saxons) first landed on the eastern side of the island, by the invitation of the unlucky king [i.e. Vortigern], and there fixed their sharp talons, apparently to fight in favour of the island, but alas! more truly against it. Their mother-land, finding her first brood thus successful, sends forth a larger company of her wolfish offspring, which sailing over, join themselves to their bastard-born comrades. [...] Some, therefore, of the miserable remnant (i.e. the Britons), being taken in the mountains, were murdered in great numbers; others, constrained by famine, came and yielded themselves to be slaves for ever to their foes, running the risk of being instantly slain, which truly was the greatest favour that could be offered them: some others passed beyond the seas with loud lamentations...

(Gildas, *On the Ruin and Conquest of Britain*, c. 550, chs. 23, 24)

[3] Bede on the arrival of the Germanic tribes

In the year of our Lord 449, Martian being made emperor with Valentinian, and the forty-sixth from Augustus, ruled the empire seven years. Then the nation of the Angles, or Saxons, being invited by the aforesaid king, arrived in Britain with three long ships, and had a place assigned them to reside in by the same king, in the eastern part of the island, that they might thus appear to be fighting for their country, whilst their real intentions were to enslave it. Accordingly they engaged with the enemy, who were come from the north to give battle, and obtained the victory; which, being known at home in their own country, as also the fertility of the country, and the cowardice of the Britons, a more considerable fleet was quickly sent over, bringing a still greater number of men, which, being added to the former, made up an invincible army. The newcomers received of the Britons a place to inhabit, upon condition that they should wage war against their enemies for the peace and security of the country, whilst the Britons agreed to furnish them with pay.

Those who came over were of the three most powerful nations of Germany—Saxons, Angles, and Jutes. From the Jutes are descended the people of Kent, and of the Isle of Wight, and those also in the province of the West Saxons who are to this day called Jutes, seated opposite to the Isle of Wight. From the Saxons, that is, the country which is now called Old Saxony, came the East-Saxons, the South-Saxons, and the West Saxons. From the Angles, that is, the country which is called Anglia, and which is said, from that time, to remain desert to this day, between the provinces of the Jutes and the Saxons, are descended the East-Angles, the Midland-Angles, Mercians, all the race of the Northumbrians, that is, of those nations that dwell on the north side of the river Humber, and the other nations of the English.

(Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 731, trans. Stevens)

[5] The stories of Weland and Beaduhild

Access images of the Franks Casket here:

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1867-0120-1

[4] *Deor*, the sufferings of Weland and Beaduhild (ll. 1–13)

Welund him be wurman wræces cunnade,
anhydig eorl earfoþa dreag,
hæfde him to gesipþe sorge ond longap,
wintercealde wræce; wean oft onfond,
siþþan hine Niðhad on nede legde,
swoncre seonobende on syllan monn.
þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg!

Beadohilde ne wæs hyre broþra deap
on sefan swa sar swa hyre sylfre þing,
þæt heo gearolice ongieten hæfde
þæt heo eacen wæs; æfre ne meahte

þriste geþencan, hu ymb þæt sceolde.
þæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg!

[*Weland endured suffering among the Worms* (?). The single-minded man suffered hardships, he had sorrow and longing as his companions, winder-cold exile, always received woe, since Nithad had placed constrictions on him, secret sinew-bands, on the better man. That passed away, so may this!]

Beadohild was not so sorry for the death of her brothers as she was for her own predicament, that she clearly understood that she was with child – afterwards she could not presumptuously think how to deal with that. That passed away, so may this!]

[5] *Beowulf*, the armour crafted by the legendary smith, Weland (ll. 452 – 55)

“[...] Onsend Higelace, gif mec hild nime,
beadu-scruda betst, þæt mine breost wereð,
hrægla selest, þæt is Hrædlan laf,
Welandes geweorc. Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel.” (*Beowulf*, ll. 452–55)

[“Send to Hygelac, if death should take me, the best of battle-armours, that my breast wears, the finest of clothing, that is Hrethel’s heirloom, **Weland’s work**. Let fate go as it must.”]

[6] *Waldere*, the power of a sword forged by Weland (frag A. ll. 1–5)

hyrde hyne georne:
“Huru *Welandes worc* ne geswiceð
monna ænigum ðara ðe Mimming can
heardne gehealdan. Oft æt hilde gedreas
swat-fag and sweord-wund secg æfter oðrum.

[[S]he encouraged him eagerly: “Indeed, *the work of Weland* will not fail any man, of those who are able to hold fierce Mimming. Often at battle fell, bloodstained and sword-wounded, one man after another [...].”]

[8] Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Weland’s faded glory (metra 7)

Latin original:

Death lumps together lowly and high-born as one;
She ranks the highest with the base.
Where are the bones of trusty Fabricius now gone?
Brutus, stern Cato have no place.

Old English translation:

Hwær sint nu þæs wisan Welandes ban,
þæs gold-smiðes, þe wæs geo mærost?

Forþy ic cwæð þæs wisan Welandes ban,
forðy ængum ne mæg eorð-buendra
se cræft losian þe him Crist onlænð.
Ne mæg mon æfre þy eð ænne wræccan
his cræftes beniman, þe mon oncerran mæg
sunnan onswifan, and ðisne swiftan rodor
of his rihtryne rinca ænig.
Hwa wat nu þæs wisan Welandes ban,
on hwelcum hi hlæwa hrusan þeccen?

(Old English *Boethius*, C-text, c. 900)

[Where now are the wise one, Weland's bones, the worker in gold, once greatest in glory? I ask where the bones of Weland are buried. For never any that on earth lives may lose any virtue lent him by Christ; nor may one poor wretch be robbed with more ease of his soul's virtue, than may the sun be swung from his path, or the swift heavens, moved from their courses by the might of a man. Who now is aware of wise Weland's bones, in what barrow lying do they litter the ground?]

[9] Scyld Scefing, a military leader and a good king

Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum,
þeodcyninga, þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.
Oft Scyld Scefing **sceapena** þreatum,
monegum mægþum, meodosetla ofteah,
egsode **eorlas**. Syððan ærest wearð
feasceaft funden, he þæs frofre gebad,
weox under wolcnum, weorðmyndum þah,
oðþæt him æghwylc þara ymbsittendra
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
gomban gylðan. þæt wæs god cyning!

[Yes, we have heard of the greatness of the Spear-Danes' high kings in days long past, how those nobles practiced bravery.

Often Scyld, son of Scef, expelled opponents' hosts, many peoples, from mead-seats, made men fear him, after he was first discovered destitute. He lived to see remedy for that: grew up under the heavens, prospered in marks of distinction, until every neighbour across the whale-road had to answer to him, pay tribute. That was a good king.]

(*Beowulf*, ll. 1–11, trans. Fulk)

The Christian conversion

[10] Augustine of Hippo on life as pilgrimage

Quomodo ergo, si essemus peregrini, qui beate vivere nisi in patria non possemus, eaque peregrinatione utique miseri et miseriam finire cupientes, in patriam redire vellemus [...] quod si amoenitates itineris, et ipsa gestatio vehiculorum nos delectaret, et conversi ad fruendum his quibus uti debuimus, nollemus cito viam finire, et perversa suavitate implicati alienaremur a patria, cuius suavitas faceret beatos: sic in huius mortalitatis vita peregrinantes a Domino.

[Therefore how would it be, if we were travellers abroad, who were not able to live happily unless in our homeland, and in any case were feeling miserable through travel and desiring to end our misery, we might desire to return to our homeland [...] but if the pleasantness of the journey and the conveyance of the vehicles themselves delight us, and having inverted that which we ought to use into what is to be enjoyed, we are unwilling to quickly finish the course, corrupted and embraced by sweetness, we are alienated from the homeland whose sweetness would make us truly happy: so it is in this mortal life, wandering away from God.]

(*De doctrina Christiana*, I. iv, my own translation)

[11] The death of Christ

46 And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying: Eli, Eli, lamma sabacthani? that is, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? 47 And some that stood there and heard, said: This man calleth Elias. 48 And immediately one of them running took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar; and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink. 49 And the others said: Let be, let us see whether Elias will come to deliver him. 50 And Jesus again crying with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost. 51 And behold the veil of the temple was rent in two from the top even to the bottom, and the earth quaked, and the rocks were rent.

(Matthew 27:46–51, Douay-Rheims Bible)

[11] The Roman emperor experiences a vision of the holy cross

He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the sign of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, “By this symbol you will conquer.” He was struck with amazement by the sight, and his whole army witnessed the miracle. [...] At the break of day he rose and told his friends about the marvel. Then he called together the workers in gold and precious stones, sat in the midst of them, and described to them the sign he had seen, telling them to represent it in gold and precious stones.

The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine by Eusebius Pamphilus, trans. Tomkins

[12] A dreamer experiences a midnight vision of the holy cross

Hwæt! Ic swefna cyst secgan wylle,
hwæt me gemætte to midre nihte,
syðþan reordberend reste wunedon!
þuhte me þæt ic gesawe syllicre treow
on lyft lædan, leohte bewunden,
beama beorhtost. Eall þæt beacen wæs
begoten mid golde. Gimmas stodon
fægere æt foldan sceatum, swylce þær fife wæron
uppe on þam eaxlegespanne. Beheoldon þær engel dryhtnes ealle,
fægere þurh forðgesceaft. Ne wæs ðær huru fracodes gealga,
ac hine þær beheoldon halige gastas,
men ofer moldan, ond eall þeos mære gesceaft.
Syllic wæs se sigebeam, ond ic synnum fah,
forwunded mid wommum.

[Listen, I will tell the best of visions,
that came to me in the middle of the night,
when voice-bearers dwelled in rest.
it seemed to me that I saw a more wonderful tree
lifted in the air, wound round with light,
the brightest of beams. That beacon was entirely
cased in gold; beautiful gems stood
at the corners of the earth, likewise there were five
upon the cross-beam. All those fair through creation
gazed on the angel of the Lord there. There was certainly no gallows of the wicked;
but holy spirits beheld it there,
men over the earth and all this glorious creation.
wondrous was the victory, and I stained with sins,
wounded with guilts.]

The Dream of the Rood, ll. 1–14a, trans. Elaine Treharne.

[13] Gregory decides to convert the English pagans to Christianity

There is a story told by the faithful that, before he [Gregory] became pope, there came to Rome certain people of our nation, fair-skinned and light-haired. When he heard of their arrival he was eager to see them; being prompted by a fortunate intuition, being puzzled by their new and unusual appearance, and above all, being inspired by God, he received them and asked what race they belonged to. (Now some say they were beautiful boys, while others say that they were curly-haired, handsome youths.) They answered, ‘the people we belong to are called **Angles**.’ ‘**Angels** of God’, he replied. Then he asked further, ‘what is the name of the king of that people?’ They said, ‘**Aelli**,’ whereupon he said, ‘**Allelulia**, God’s praise must be heard there.’ Then he asked the name of their own tribe, to which they answered ‘**Deire**’, and he replied, ‘They shall flee **from the wrath** [*de ira*] of God to the faith.’

Life of Gregory, c. 715

[14] Gregory on strategic conversion of the English pagans

Gregory to Mellitus, Abbot in France.

Since the departure of our congregation, which is with you, we have been in a state of great suspense from having heard nothing of the success of your journey. But when Almighty God shall have brought you to our most reverend brother the bishop Augustine, tell him that *I have long been considering with myself about the case of the Angli; to wit, that the temples of idols in that nation should not be destroyed, but that the idols themselves that are in them should be. Let blessed water be prepared, and sprinkled in these temples, and altars constructed, and relics deposited, since, if these same temples are well built, it is needful that they should be transferred from the worship of idols to the service of the true God; that, when the people themselves see that these temples are not destroyed, they may put away error from their heart, and, knowing and adoring the true God, may have recourse with the more familiarity to the places they have been accustomed to.* [...] For it is undoubtedly impossible to cut away everything at once from hard hearts, since one who strives to ascend to the highest place must needs rise by steps or paces, and not by leaps.

Letters of Gregory the Great, Book XI, Letter 76, trans. Barmby

[15] The conversion of King Edwin

Another of the king's chief men, approving of his wise words and exhortations, added thereafter: "The present life of man upon earth, Oh king, seems to me, in comparison with that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the house wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your ealdormen and thanes, while the fire blazes in the midst, and the hall is warmed, but the wintry storms of rain or snow are raging abroad. The sparrow, flying in at one door and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry tempest; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, passing from winter into winter again. So this life of man appears for a little while, but of what is to follow or what went before we know nothing at all. If, therefore, this new doctrine tells us something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed." The other elders and king's counsellors, by Divine prompting, spoke to the same effect.

Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, II. 13

[16] The hall in Beowulf

Swa rixode ond wið rihte wan,
ana wið eallum, oðþæt idel stod
husa selest.

[So he (i.e. Grendel) oppressed them, and strove against what was right, one against all, until the best of houses stood useless]

(*Beowulf*, ll. 144–146a)

[17] 1 Kings 1:38–40 (Douay-Rheims Bible), Solomon is anointed King of Israel

38 So Sadoc the priest, and Nathan the prophet went down, and Banaïas the son of Joiada, and the Cerethi, and Phelethi: and they set Solomon upon the mule of king David, and brought him to Gihon. 39 **And Sadoc the priest took a horn of oil out of the tabernacle, and anointed Solomon: and they sounded the trumpet, and all the people said: God save king Solomon.** 40 And all the multitude went up after him, and the people played with pipes, and rejoiced with a great joy, and the earth rang with the noise of their cry.

[18] *Beowulf*, ll. 175 – 88, the Danes worship at pagan shrines

Hwilum hie geheton æt hærg-trafum
wig-weorþunga, wordum bædon
þæt him gast-bona geoce gefremede
wið þeod-þreaum. Swylc wæs þeaw hyra,
hæþenra hyht; helle gemundon
in mod-sefan, metod hie ne cuþon,
dæda demend, ne wiston hie drihten god,
ne hie huru heofena helm herian ne cuþon,
wuldres waldend. Wa bið þæm ðe sceal
þurh sliðne nið sawle bescufan
in fyres fæþm, frofre ne wenan,
wihte gewendan; wel bið þæm þe mot
æfter deað-dæge drihten secean
ond to fæder fæþmum freoðo wilnian.

[Sometimes they offered honour to idols at pagan shrines, requested with prayers that the soul-slayer would bring about a remedy for them, in the people's affliction. Such was their custom, the hope of the heathen, they remembered hell in their minds, they did not know the Measurer; the Judge of Deeds, nor did they know the Lord God, nor indeed did they know how to pray to the Protector of the Heavens, Wielder of Glory. Woe unto him who must thrust his soul into the fire's embrace through wicked force, he expects no comfort, nor expects any change in fortune! It will be good for he who, after death-day, might seek the Lord and find security in the embrace of the Father.]

[19] Caedmon's *Hymn*

Nu scylun hergan hefaen-ricaes uard,
metudæs maecti end his mod-gidanc,
uerc uuldur-fadur, sue he uundra gihuaes,
eci dryctin, or astelidæ.

He aerist scop aelda barnum
heben til hrofe, haleg scepen;
tha middun-geard mon-cynnæs uard,
eci dryctin, æfter tiadæ
firum foldu, frea allmectig.

[‘Now we must praise the guardian of the heavenly kingdom, the Measurer’s might, and his purpose of mind, the work of the Father of Glory, as he made each wonder, Eternal Lord, first established. He first made the heaven as a roof for the sons of men, Holy Shaper; then the Guardian of mankind, Eternal Lord, afterwards made the middle-earth, the world for men, Almighty Lord.’]

[20] From Bede’s account of the life of St Æthelthryth

KING EGFRID married Etheldrida, a daughter of Anna, king of the East Angles, of whom mention has been often made; a man very religious, and in all respects renowned for his inward disposition and actions. She had before been given in marriage to another, viz. to Tonbert, chief of the Southern Girvii; but he died soon after he had received her, and she was given to the aforesaid king. Though she lived with him twelve years, yet she preserved the glory of perfect virginity, as I was informed by Bishop Wilfrid, of blessed memory, of whom I inquired, because some questioned the truth thereof; and he told me that he was an undoubted witness of her virginity, forasmuch as Egfrid promised he would give many lands and much money, if he could persuade the queen to consent to pay the marriage duty, for he knew the queen loved no man so much as himself; and it is not to be doubted that the same might in one instance take place in our age, which true histories tell us happened several times in former ages, through the assistance of the same Lord who has promised to continue with us unto the end of the world; for the miraculous circumstance that her flesh, being buried, could not suffer corruption, is a token that she had not been defiled by familiarity with man.

She had long requested the king that he would permit her to lay aside wordly cares, and to serve only the true King, Christ, in a monastery; and having at length with difficulty prevailed, she went as a nun into the monastery of the Abbess Ebba, who was aunt to King Egfrid, at the place called the city Coludi, having taken the veil from the hands of the aforesaid Bishop Wilfrid; but a year after she was herself made abbess in the country called Ely, where, having built a monastery, she began, by works and examples of a heavenly life, to be the virgin mother of very many virgins dedicated to God.

Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* IV:19-20, 23

Suggested reading

1. Migration

Manuscripts:

Exeter Book website (with images): <https://theexeterbook.exeter.ac.uk/index.html>

Kevin Kiernan's *Electronic Beowulf*: <https://ebeowulf.uky.edu/ebeo4.0/>

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Cultural Contexts, MT
Prof. Rachel A. Burns

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2. Conversion

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