

Ebandun: An Epic Poem in Twelve Parts (Bk VII)



“He made the Danes and longs for them to know him, just as he made the Saxons and the Franks.”

Illustration by Miko Simmons

VII. One Body

Beornwulf delivers a body to Guthrum, who celebrates Alfred's death by offering "Mervyn" his pick of brides. Mervyn learns that Ealhswith and the children are Guthrum's prisoners. Hrothulf and Wan enlist him in their plot. .

The winter sun's heroic pyre, on which
the King of Heaven slathered lavish hues
of dragon, iron, gold, elm, whale, and plum
of depth and subtlety, and on a scale,
our earthly artisans can never equal—
by which he regularly illustrates
the coming recreation of the world,
as well as his departures and returns—
the sunset, had been stowed when a stout guardsman,
a Frisian lad, fetched "Mervyn" to the stables.[\[1\]](#)

The harper found Gorm bent over a cart[\[2\]](#)
with Halga by his side, holding a torch,
and next to Halga, able Beornwulf.
When Gormr turned, the earl's flicking flame,
by swelling and enlivening the bumps
and hollows of their faces, changed the men
into a panel of three voiceless devils
deliberating judgment on the dead:
for on the cart a prostrate body lay
rolled up in Alfred's soiled scarlet mantle,
with Alfred's chain-mail coat tied at its throat
and Alfred's sword and scabbard on its chest.
The rodent-bitten forehead wore the casque
that Osweard's shop had wrought for Athelbald:
two rows of garnets, carved from Cerdic's
congealed blood and set along each rib
led upwards to a little golden boar,
whose round snout and semicircular tusks

solicited that spirit's cunning fury.[\[3\]](#)
In many a near-run scrap, this gilded hat
had kept the youngest Athulfing in life[\[4\]](#)
when his three brothers had gone down to death.

But now the maker's dome surmounted not
the Saxon monarch's cogitating brow,
but flame-enkindled swatches of dead flesh
that gripped a dead skull's ridges, seams, and curves.
The Welsh harper's heart flumped in its cage
at sluggish maggots curling in dark sockets
and the black cavern of its chewed-off nose
as the sharp stench the chill could not suppress
bit into his unstoppered passageways.
The swineherd dropped his eyes when he perceived
the false British bard, his one-eyed lord.

"Liar," Halga said to Beornwulf.
"This half-thawed lich has been dead for weeks."[\[5\]](#)

"Lord," the swineherd said, still looking down,[\[6\]](#)
"we feared you foreign earls. And your king."

"This business stinks of Saxonish deceit,"
good Halga said to Godrum, Eric's bane.[\[7\]](#)
Again he rated the subservient churl.
"I say it was Lord Athelnoth who sent you.
Or the fat axeman, Bishop Athelheah."

At this, the northern chieftain intervened,
the torchlight trembling in his humid pupils.
"Do you deny, my unbelieving friend,"[\[8\]](#)
he said, "that this corrupting lump is Alfred?
Was he so great and godlike, in your eyes,
the man who massacred my noble son?[\[9\]](#)
His folk have paid in full for that infraction.
Born of his death, our ransomed life begins."

"Then drink it in, my friend," said Halga, yielding.

“Some Saxon satrap flashed these fancy trappings.”

Again old Godrum turned to face his poet.

“Propitious, potent Briton,” he began,
his flaming features cut across with pleasure,
“I take no satisfaction, as a rule,
in gaping at a beaten foe’s remains,
but no more ample answer could he give,
this God of yours, to your industrious prayers.”[\[10\]](#)

King Alfred tacked a quick cross to his chest.

“We ask his mercy on your enemy,”
he said, “if said enemy is truly dead.”

“Do you too doubt?” the heathen king replied.

“These are his arms. You said you saw him fall.”

“He was as tall as you,” the harper said.

The pagan sailor, suddenly inspired,
nimble hopped on Beornwulf’s creaking cart,
which Halga and the Frisian guardsman steadied,
and bedded down beside the juggled form.

“Then measure us, old Mervyn,” Guthrum said.

“Take his sword and lay it against our feet.”[\[11\]](#)

The seed of Ingeld drew the braided blade,
which Ecgbert, Athulf’s father, had received,
a parting gift, from Charles the Great before
returning to campaign for Ini’s throne.[\[12\]](#)

He hefted its familiar, balanced weight
in his well-rested hand and eyed the edge
of gemlike steel, whetted by himself,
that the scabbard’s fleece lining had preserved.
A stream of firelight poured along the fuller
and sparkled in the runes that graced its banks.
King Alfred felt the Holy Spirit stir
and glanced at Denewulf’s clandestine brother.

The chieftain asked him, "Can you read the legend?
I know the characters, but not this speech."[\[13\]](#)

"It's Latin, from King David," Alfred answered.

"Et gladius meus non salvabit me—

My salvation lies not in minum sweorde."[\[14\]](#)

He held the burning blade to four worn shoesoles.

"Now judge between us, brother," ordered Gormr,
groping for the soldier's covered hand,

"now who do you say is the nobler king?"[\[15\]](#)

"Let's take off this helmet," Halga said,[\[16\]](#)

and loosening the laces, found the ivory
crucifix beneath the sleeper's neck.

"King Edmund's inauspicious cross," he noted.[\[17\]](#)

"That's further proof this rottenness is Alfred,"
Godrum said. "The Saxons robbed our Atli."

He gripped the rail and pulled himself upright.

"Three times young Alfred had me by the beard.

But here I am, and here he is, or was."

Remembering Beorn's feigned death at Luna—[\[18\]](#)

"Give me that," he said, grabbing the sword,[\[19\]](#)

and pressed its keen neck through the waxy gullet.

The Saxon swallowed hard and searched for words.

"The good Lord broke him down to crush his pride.

The Spirit led this churl to his berth

just as he led Saint Ambrose to the place [\[20\]](#)

Protasius and Gervasius were buried—

though Alfred was no saint, as we can tell

comparing this unregenerate odor

with Cuthbert's ruddy cheeks, still fresh, they say,

after a dozen summers in the coffin."[\[21\]](#)

He stopped, impressed with Beornwulf's design
or Denewulf's, or Bishop Athelheah's.

They must have thought, if he yet lived, yet free,

the heathens' misbelief in his extinction
would veil his imposture from their sight.

"Your first commission is complete," said Godrum.
He fixed his favorite earl with swimming eyes.
"It seems she'll have to yield and remit
the year-long moratorium she begged for."
(Poor Alfred thought he meant his local widow.)
"In any case, we'll quickly crown our princeling,"
continued Gorm, "before her hero's howe."
The earl eyed the corpse and pursed his lips.

"And you, my boy," young Harald's father added,
bathing Beornwulf in lordly warmth,
"from now on you're our chartered royal swineherd.
Come back in ten days' time with forty head.
I'll pay you then your bounty for this—bounty."



The greater light had breached the eastern woods,
illuminating tiny spikes and leaves
that in their millions tinged the withered earth
and unappareled trees a milky green,
when Alfred, breathing in the biting air,
mounted the robbers' newly built stockade.
In little time, he counted ravens, doves,
a goldcrest and a merlin and a kite
that tumbled, cruised, or wheeled on the breeze
or fluttered in the scrub in search of breakfast.
He listened to their variegated calls,
each in its lingo crying, "Here I am."

How fresh the newborn earth and air appeared,
now Guthrum planned to plant his lying clay!
In days the early plowing would begin,
when husbandmen would sow their summer crops
and soon would be available to fight—

unless he failed to thwart the oarsman's scheme,
dreamt up by Grim himself, or by the devil,
to crown a Saxon puppet and transform
a people's struggle into civil strife.[\[22\]](#)

He found the king in his scriptorium
(both "king" and "his" referring to the farer),[\[23\]](#)
perusing the accounts of royal lands
the Athulfing's successor would enjoy
along with food rents, leases, tolls, and fines,
the proceeds of the mints, if he revived them,
and tribute from submissive British kings,
for Alfred had instructed royal Godrum
in how to con the Irish minuscule,
which as the currency of holy writ
might lead him to explore the Gospel hoard.
He'd handed him his enchiridion,
a manual of graspable quotations.
He'd even taught him Bede's arithmetic
and the odd dance of fingers, chest, and thighs
whereby the scholar calculated sums.

The seed of Ingeld hankered to repair
the sundial the Danes had vandalized
and frame the fiend a Christian calendar
replete with feast-days for the saints, and fasts,
the kalends, ides, and nones, the lunar quarters,
the equinoxes and the solstices—
contrivances whereby the Father urges
men to cherish the hours they've been given.
The grizzled Jutlander, adept from youth
in Woden's scrivening, speedily had learned
to sound the signs in silence to himself
(as could Augustine's mystagogue, great Ambrose),[\[24\]](#)
for he well knew a vellum scroll conveyed
more substance than a stone scratched with a spell.

"Good morning, son," indulgent Mervyn said.[\[25\]](#)

When murdered Godfred's grandson raised his face,
the Saxon saw a sparkle in his eye
and an unfeigned smile stir in his beard.

"I have a gift for you," the shipman said
and led him down the hallway towards the nursery.
The Saxon marveled at his merry mood,
imagining the man might make his magus
the keeper of the cold king's regalia
or bearer of a cup formed from his skull,
like that from which the Lombard Alboin gulped
to toast dead Cunimund, the Gepid king
(which he compelled his Gepid queen to quaff,
revengeful Rosamund, the Gepid's daughter), [\[26\]](#)
or that with which old Krum, the Bulgar khan,
commemorated Emperor Nicephorus,
beheaded while retiring from Pliska
after butchering heaps of Bulgar folk. [\[27\]](#)

"You're jovial," the jocolator said.
"Now that your stubborn enemy's defunct,
which Saxon *magister* will you call king?
Lord Wulfhere, is it, or his worthy son?
You've met with them in private, I believe."

"The spring comes early here," said Gormr, grinning,
unwilling to divulge his current view,
"in this benign, sub-septentrional clime."

Good Halga, rising when the pair arrived,
the prosperous conqueror and the crop-haired bard,
took up his stance beside three native women,
among whom Ingeld's scion recognized,
in morning brightness pouring from the smoke hole,
the scraggy countenance of Lady Hilda,
his wife's companion, whom he'd last addressed
in that same chamber following Atli's fall.
The widow glared irately at the Dane,

ignoring his ill-favored, one-eyed slave.

"Come forward, Mervyn," Godfred's grandson said.
"Let none say Godrum stints the men who serve him.
I know your Lord won't let you wed all three."

Trembling, the harper eyed a plumpish girl
whose raven pigtailed framed her flaming cheeks.
"What is your name, my dear?" the Dane inquired.[\[28\]](#)

"Nest, my lord," she said, ineptly dipping.
"A Britoness, my *brego*, from old Lacock."[\[29\]](#)

"Your countrywoman, Mervyn," noted Gormr.
While Harald's father chuckled, Hilda goggled
at what her soul, astonished, had perceived,
the ravaged apparition of her atheling.

"And what are you?" the Jutish ruler asked
a wan and lanky lass with pallid hair.
"Alfflaed, sir," she said, dropping her chin.
"A Saxoiness." She sneaked a glance at Nest.
"My lord," the earl vigilantly prompted.

"What do you say, good Mervyn?" asked the fiend,
"a Saxon stean to seethe a British babe?"[\[30\]](#)

"I humbly thank my headman," Alfred said,[\[31\]](#)
"but my old woman, back in old Dumnonia—"
"We'll bring her here," the beaming chief replied.
"I fear she took another husband, sir,"
the singer said, at which a surge of feeling
purpled Hilda's cheeks and quivering chin.

"I know your law allows you to remarry,"
the fiend declared, then turned his eye on Hilda.
"Say what you are," he barked, a ruthless master.
The lady blazed.[\[32\]](#) Her narrow nostrils flared.
"This is Lady Hilda," said the devil.

She spat, hitting the mat at Guthrum's foot.

"I hate to choose," the harper temporized.

"When Paris judged among three goddesses,
he lit the lamp that gutted golden Troy."

"We know of Troy," said Gormr. "**Miklagarþr.*
Red Thor was Priam's son. This gal's no goddess." [\[33\]](#)
Hilda spat again, dewing his shoe.

"And I am no Greek god," acknowledged Alfred.

With the dame's fingers burning on his hips,
the seed of Ingeld jogged behind the pagan
along the trail northward from the lodge.

"My men have improvised a nuptial bed,"
Gormr, riding ahead, threw over his shoulder.

"We bless our kingly master," Alfred called,
then added softly to his wizened bride,
"the Lord bless your fortitude, dear lady, [\[34\]](#)
in holding out against the foreign fiends."

"The Lord God bless you, my dearest hero," [\[35\]](#)
she murmured, "you must stick that sinner now!"
They reached the dripping, dim, neglected croft,
still littered with the autumn's black remains.
A devil trotted from around a corner
chivvied by a troupe of soiled children.

Startled, Alfred recognized young Edward
and Athelgeofu and little Elfthryth.
His spirits swelled, as when the living wind
stoops suddenly, an *ælf* among the waves,
and fills the slack sail, which, with a shock
like thunder cracking, bellies and balloons,
a dazzling woolen cloud, harboring shadow,
and mariners, till then becalmed, rejoice
as the straked vessel scuds across the swells,

but then the gale fades and vanishes
and the weft settles limp against the mast
and the craft loses way and slews about,
exposed to the rude shoulders of the main.
His children were the sailors' prisoners,
and he lacked men and means to set them free.

He scarcely felt Hilda slide from the saddle
or heard the heathen's flippant admonition
not to scare the pups with his evil eye.
Shivering where he sat, the seed of Ingeld
watched his children swarm and grapple Ulf,
who steered for Godrum lo these many years,
and lever him, guffawing, to the ground
then scatter, shouting, through the muddy pools
and halt among the gnarled apple trees.
He saw and wondered, like the famous father
who stopped beside a snowy field to watch
a hound chasing a high-tailing hare. [\[36\]](#)

When Edward halted, staring up at him,
their half-hairless, one-eyed bitch by his side,
he wore the worried look of one who sounds
each face he sees for one he longs to see
but who, his hunger regularly baffled,
now disbelieves his too hopeful eyes.
He gave the ugly traveler a grin,
as if acknowledging a stranger's wish
to comfort an unhappy fellow stranger.



With mock solemnity and modest pride,
as if he were a monk exhibiting
an antique episcopal sepulcher,
the Frisian hoard-guard unbarred a storeroom
in which the men had decked a wedding bed.
"No one has had her yet," the lad declared,

his copper whiskers curtaining his lips.

“Our chief commanded us to tell you so.”

The harper set a candle on a chest.

She'd told him how the fiends had captured them, wending their wild way from Frome to Sherborne, and how his young hall-guards fought and fell. She'd told him how poor Ealhswith had prayed, revolted by Gorm's courtship, for salvation, but when none came, she'd schemed to save her son, whom Wulfhere schemed to set aside, or worse, in favor of his grandsons, Athred's heirs. [\[37\]](#) Accordingly, on seeing Alfred's cloak and helm embellishing his feigned remains, Ealhswith had agreed to stand with Godrum the day her Edward donned his father's crown. And all this time, he'd dawdled in the hall?

“I didn't know, I swear,” the Saxon said.

“Besides, I have my duties to our people.”

“The whole world knew but you,” Hilda pursued, “you, our studious Christian sage.”

“The sailor trusts me now,” said Athulf's son. He turned and watched the candle's brilliance writhe.

“Your potions sap your spouse's soul,” said Hilda.

“But we shall see who wields the stronger art.”

She drew a homely figure from her bundle.

“A graven image,” murmured Ingeld's seed.

The *freo* gazed at it, her face a mask. [\[38\]](#)

“We will remove the devil,” Alfred said,

“but not by begging help from hellish elves.

Behind their chief stands royal Hemming's seed.

Behind him, Hrothulf, who consumes our folk.

Behind him, Godrum's five efficient earls,

any of whom the heathens could call king.”

When he was done, the lady boiled over
and shoved him hard against the storeroom wall.
“Behind me,” Hilda cried, “behind old Hild,”
her anger so astringing Alfred’s scalp
that every stem of stubble stood accused,
“behind me stand a thousand Saxon women
stripped of every blessed rag of worth!”
Her damp features pressed so close to his eye
he saw each thread of down along her jaw,
then suddenly she crumpled to the floor
and lay uttering bleak, metallic moans
that echoed pitiably in the daub cell.
The king discerned a wretched human relic,
a knot of sticks wrapped in woven stuff,
and scooped her up and held her to his chest.

“It is my burden,” muttered Edward’s father.
“It is my charge to bear. I will. *Ic wille.*”
He lowered her, still moaning, to the bed
and tucked a sheepskin rug under her chin.

When Hilda’s lamentation ebbed, she said,
“Lie here beside me, *cyning*. I feel cold.
Don’t fret. I’m old enough to be your mother.”

The seed of Ingeld wobbled onto the pallet
and edged beneath the weighty, stale fleeces. [\[39\]](#)
He heard the lady’s breathing near his ear.
“Forgive me, gracious *frea*,” Hilda said. [\[40\]](#)
She felt for Alfred’s hand under the rug.



Lord Halga lay awake, with Ymme’s belly
rising like a barrow from their bed. [\[41\]](#)
A tallow candle propagated soot.
The Frankish girl shifted under her burden.

“My king is quiet,” Ymme said. “No thoughts?”

“This island is alive with snakes,” said Halga.
“Specifically, the Saxon and Welsh rabble
that feign willing obedience to our rule.”

“You worry like a mother hen,” said Ymme, [\[42\]](#)
“but your accomplished cousin has prevailed
behind his even greater cousin’s shield.”

“I’ll tell you what disturbs me most,” he said.
“Gormr’s saddle galls my gallant get, [\[43\]](#)
yet I must nurse the greatness of them both.”

“And nurse your own,” said Ymme soberly,
stretching across her breast to stroke his cheek.
“I pray our Lord will ease your worries, dear. [\[44\]](#)
He made the Danes and longs for them to know him,
just as he made the Saxons and the Franks.”

But Halga said with sudden bitterness,
“Somewhere some troll, the imp of Athelwulf,
is mustering a secret Saxon host.
If that unreal Mervyn the Physician
harms one whisker on our chief’s chin,
he’ll wish he’d never squirted from his mother.”
He stopped, his laugh a sharp, vulpine bark.
The seed of Hemming nuzzled his young maid,
but Ymme felt a shiver up her neck.



Ten nights had passed since Beornwulf consigned
the pseudo-relics into Guthrum’s keeping
when Edward’s father, desperately grateful,
again breathed the chill dark at his side.
No moonlight whitewashed Athulf’s lodge, for cloud
blanketed the upper and lower heavens,
though cheerful voices, mingling with the gleemen’s
measures, filtered down from the unseen eaves.
Like devils who detest the joys of men, [\[45\]](#)

the swineherd and his secret chief conspired and parted with religious valedictions, when suddenly two strangers seized the king.

“So Welsh Mervyn has a Saxon friend,”[\[46\]](#) said one as Alfred strained against their strength. “You know they hate us, sir,” the other twitted, mimicking the churl’s servile drawl.

The seed of Ingeld knew Lord Halga’s son and guessed the other was the mollusc-eater, chief of the clam-foraging Limfjord men. Alfred thought of Wisdom’s dear philosopher, whose letters to the emperor the Goths under Theodoric had intercepted—Theodoric, the father of us all.[\[47\]](#) The heretic confined his minister and had him questioned—id est, clubbed to death—but not before he filled five wondrous books with literature on Wisdom and her Lord.

“The swineherd is a faithful servant, sirs,” said Alfred, baiting his interrogators. “Delivering the Saxon king’s remains, he brought our king security and joy.”

“As you have done,” the junior fiend replied. “Your name is recognized throughout Saxonia as that of Gorm’s counselor, and his leech.”

“And of Gorm’s fetch,” the other devil said. “But Gorm’s royal kinsman needs your care.”[\[48\]](#)

“I suffer,” Hrothulf said. “I sweat. I pine. An evil **alfr* blocks me on my path:[\[49\]](#) the wretched, murdered, prophesying wizard the Saxons and the Welsh adore as Lord.”

“He works through witching women,” Wan pursued.

“The Frankish wench has feminized his father
and nurtures a usurper in her womb.”

“While Gormr courts the Saxon queen,” said Hrothulf, [\[50\]](#)
“and promises her son will rule the Danes.”

“You shall repel this troll,” the earl said,
“by cursing Christian Ymme with your herbs.”
“By cursing Alfred’s widow,” Hrothulf said, [\[51\]](#)
“and Gorm, who means to reign in Edward’s name.”

“My Jutish chiefs mistake me,” Alfred quailed.
“I am Godrum’s loyal slave, and though
you mock the Savior, I too revere him.”

“You think us fools?” demanded Halga’s son.
“You think no druids dwell in Dorchester,”
the black berserker scoffed, “no cunning men?”
“You’ll help us,” said the hero, “with your spells.”
“And then,” said Wan, “you shall install this prince
as overlord of all the British kingdoms.” [\[52\]](#)
“For we know who you are,” said Hemming’s scion.
“And we know what you are,” said Jarl Wan,
“foresightful, potent, venerable *Merlin*.”

At last the gleeman grasped their argument.
He shuddered as the lesser light, uncovered,
defined his foes and lit their tenuous breath. [\[53\]](#)
“*Wala*, you have sniffed me out,” said Alfred.
“Midnight tonight, I’ll howl an elfish spell
to purge these elfish evils from your souls.”

[\[1\]](#) Alfred

[\[2\]](#) Alfred

[\[3\]](#) K. Athelbald d. 860; K. Cerdic d. 534

[\[4\]](#) lif (OE)

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

[\[6\]](#) domne (OE)

- [7] K. Eric I d. 854
- [8] *uinr (0E)
- [9] Harald
- [10] *Kup (0E)
- [11] *suirp (0E)
- [12] K. Ecgbert acc. 802; K. Ini d. 726; Ingeld is Ecgbert's
gt.-gt.-gt.-gt.-gd.-uncle
- [13] *bokstafar (0E)
- [14] Ps. 44:6-7
- [15] *brupur, *kunukr (0E)
- [16] *hialmr (0E)
- [17] K. Edmund d. 870
- [18] Saxo bk. ii
- [19] *kunælt, war-flame (0E)
- [20] St. Ambrose d. 397
- [21] St. Cuthbert d. 687
- [22] leod (0E)
- [23] ferend (0E)
- [24] St. Ambrose d. 397
- [25] maga (0E)
- [26] K. Alboin d. 573; K. Cunimund d. 567; Q. Rosamund d. 573
- [27] K. Krum d. 814; Emp. Nicephorus d. 811
- [28] *nafn (0E)
- [29] king (0E)
- [30] *barn (0E)
- [31] heafodmann (0E)
- [32] freo (0E)
- [33] Constantinople (0E); *pur (0E)
- [34] sipwif (0E)
- [35] hæleð (0E)
- [36] St. Augustine of Hippo
- [37] K. Athelred d. 871
- [38] lady (0E)
- [39] fliesu (0E)
- [40] lord (0E)
- [41] *haukr (0E)
- [42] Matt. 23:37
- [43] *niþr, son (0E)
- [44] *liufr (0E)
- [45] "atolum aglæcum, Caines cynne": dire monsters, offspring
of Cain

- [46] *uin (OE)
- [47] Boethius; Emp. Justin I 518–527; K. Theodoric d. 526
- [48] *fulkia, *fronti (OE)
- [49] elf (OE)
- [50] *trutnik (OE)
- [51] *ankia (OE)
- [52] *iufur, *rikir (OE)
- [53] tungolscin (OE)