

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

The Burning Ridge

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



*Frea defends us from the enfeebling grief,
the sad disease, the burial alive
we suffer separated from our friends...*

Guthrum and Halga contemplate the coming effort. Toca feasts with Earl Wan in Dorchester. Alfred meets up with Athelheah and others at Ecgbert's Stone and leads his army to the Polden Hills.

"The tinder has been laid," said Godfred's offspring,[\[1\]](#)
"and now awaits a spark from him who hurls
the thunderbolt, whoever he may be:
far-seeing Har, tough Thor, or Laufey's child;
or fate, or providence, the Christians' word
for all that is and everything that happens
by order of their threefold head, their *prenik;
or Satan, heaven's clever enemy,
who officers the powers of the air."[\[2\]](#)
Who do you think will show himself, my friend?
Our father, who demands the foeman's blood?
Or Mary's Son, who shares in all our sorrows?"[\[3\]](#)

So Gormr said to Halga, Ymme's man,
whose meaty hands were cupped around the peaks
of freshly whittled pales of beech and elm
atop the sailors' new-built palisade.[\[4\]](#)
As Halga sniffed the brine, blent with the damp
that wafted from the breastworks and the ditch,
the bulging sun unrolled a sheet of gold
on Parrett's flooded bed west of the ridge
and rubbed a reddish fire on his forehead.

"Just look at us, as chatty as two Saxons,"
said Gormr, seeing Halga's features color.
"Such doubts have dogged us since my heathen kinsmen
contested Hedeby with your drenched uncle."[\[5\]](#)
Enough. We're here to crush these cattle thieves,
not hire on our future kingdom's gods."[\[6\]](#)

Staring, King Harald's great-nephew asked,

“Will Hrothulf join us here, my headstrong son?[\[7\]](#)
That’s what you’re really wondering, it seems.
You did wisely, bringing the Mercian with you.”

“We don’t know whether Siward’s men,” said Godrum,[\[8\]](#)
“aggrieved by his unpunished death, will show.
There’s much we don’t know, Halga, but I swear,
my crown, such as it is, and all I own
will pass to you as heir of him I served,
your uncle Eric, royal Hemming’s son,
King Lothar’s Christian count of Dorestad.”[\[9\]](#)
A gull flared overhead, then veered from sight.

“Alive to my disgrace, I thank my king,”[\[10\]](#)
said Halga, almost envying a father
who’d never known the rancor of an heir.

“Then let us pray,” said Gormr, “to our hero,
the elf or god or ghost who governs here—
though I for one would rather cast the runes
than launch our men on the mad froth of battle.”[\[11\]](#)
Sir, send us strength to shatter Saxon swords[\[12\]](#)
and bring the unruly Danes and kingless natives
under the leafy heaven of one law.
But if you don’t intend us to prevail,
then grant that we remain faithful to you
beyond whatever failure you decree,
so when you cull your picked men, your chosen,
we may dwell in your longstanding hall
together with our never-dying friends.”[\[13\]](#)

The Danish chieftains, with no further word,
descended from the twilit parapet
and, leaving behind the near-finished fortress,
entered the smoky, crowded Danish camp
that huddled in a flock beneath the works.
Small cooking fires blinked among the tents,
and cooking tackle clacked with quiet cheer.[\[14\]](#)

Toca, Toca's son, now reeve of Sherborne,
sat next to Wan, ex-follower of Ingwar's,
in Hrothulf's hall, where prudent Alfstan ruled
before the foreign floaters cut him down.[\[15\]](#)
Turning his horn of beer, the bishop's brew,[\[16\]](#)
a tun of which he'd trundled from his cellar,
the reeve revolved admonishments for Hrothulf,
which it appeared he must impart through Wan,
the youngster being absent from the high seat.

"To Dorchester," the Orbaek man began,
"we've marched, burdened with byrnies and bright swords,
with cattle, swine, and chickens in our train,
although we might have mustered at Down End."[\[17\]](#)

The head berserker frowned disgustedly.
"With Athelheah's freebooters loose," he said,
"I don't know why you'd rush to shore up Gorm.[\[18\]](#)
There's virgin earth to plow in Saxon Devon.
The Cornish lords, unraveling Tamar's braids,[\[19\]](#)
will thrust Odda back on our keen steel."

A twinge of fear flickered in Toca's innards
as though the one-eyed strategist drew near.
"Guttorm plans to pacify the land,"
he said, "and plant a kingdom for the Danes.
We didn't vote to plunder Hrothulf's father,
whose father-brother Eric we all served."[\[20\]](#)

Ingwar's messmate said to Toca's son,
"King Gorm intends to Saxonize the Danes
or Britonize us, urging us to cringe
before the perforated Christian image.
That's madness, mad, unmanly foreign fraud.
Name the English kings that boaster succored—
Edmund, Osbert, Aella, Athelred?[\[21\]](#)
The latter's callow agnate, now interred?
Grim enjoins us to destroy our foes

and string them up in tribute to his godhead.[\[22\]](#)
Had we foreknown that backing Hemming's son
would later count as throwing over Thror,
we wouldn't have fought King Eric's Zealanders."[\[23\]](#)

Candle fires swayed in his glazed eyes
as, leaning forward, Wan, confiding, said,
"I wouldn't bet on Gorm in this reshuffling.
Besides our swordsmen, we have well-placed allies:
the alderman of Wiltshire, who commands
a Saxon swarm dispersed in Guttorm's rear,
as well as Gorm's disgusting British bard.[\[24\]](#)
We have your Halga's would-be Frankish queen[\[25\]](#)
and Wulfthryth, who still pines for Athred's throne.
At need, we have the embittered Cornish king."[\[26\]](#)

Dissembling his dismay, the Himmerlander
inhaled the scent of Athelheah's ale
then sipped and gulped and looked away to where
a scald of Hrothulf's entertained the diners.[\[27\]](#)
A younger warrior from Walcheren,
he struck the anxious oarsman with the sheer
vivacity and polish of his song,[\[28\]](#)
although he prostituted Kvasir's cup[\[29\]](#)
to counterfeiting mirth with mean deceits
instead of nursing courage in men's hearts.
He offered up the portrait of a provost[\[30\]](#)
who boasted of his deeds in love and war,
which he adorned with references to gods
the circumstances made ridiculous.

Lord Toca understood, with growing anger,
the blusterer was begging for his life,[\[31\]](#)
attempting to persuade some unknown foe
that slaying him would stain the slayer's name.
"One hidden dimple in my hide," he cried,
"a sparrow's droppings made impregnable—
elsewhere a man might slice me like a pie."

His treasures, too, would taint his conqueror.
“This bead found in the street, this stolen brooch,
this copper anklet from a lady’s slave,
the ear spoon men call Gram, and this black horse”–
fearing at first the fool was fliting Frey,
the earl realized that the base braggart
was none other than the sober Scanian,
Smala’s son, the loved lord of Lund.[\[32\]](#)

As Hrothulf’s haughty satirist, whose name
the seed of Toca still could not recall,
approached the fatal stroke Lord Wan bestowed,
the captain turned and caught Wan’s ugly grin.[\[33\]](#)
Thus do the giants pass their nights in hell,
the lord of Orbaek mused, slandering Thor.
Thus they stoke their revolt against the world,
which if they could, they’d burn to the last cinder.[\[34\]](#)

Fear of the fiends and fear of treason’s steel
counseled a slow approach to Ecgbert’s stone.
The Saxon and his Somersetan force
waited, screened by apple trees in flower
(whose petals glowed with their own inward light
and whose unworldly scent perfumed the hollow),
for Aeffa, son of Theobald, to return.
For, at the risk of bumping into devils,
he’d run ahead to scout the mustering place.

The king had issued summonses to men
who owed him service as his ministers,
recipients of privileges and lands,
but only if he deemed they’d pay their debt
and not report his purpose to the fiends.
He hadn’t sent for Wulfhere, for example,
but he’d dispatched Tata to fetch Lord Odda,
quick Witbrord to petition Sherborne’s ruler,
and Acca to call Eadwulf of Berkshire,
son of and successor to that Athulf

death took at Reading, hacking Halfdan's henchmen. [\[35\]](#)
Old Alfstan, Alfred's royal father's friend,
was dead, he'd heard, as was Saint Swithun's heir
who'd sung his psalm escaping Alfred's hall.
How many Saxons died that night, the night
the learned Persians hailed the *Heahfrea!* [\[36\]](#)

All told, he'd launched a dozen messengers,
bread cast upon the flood, of whom yet six [\[37\]](#)
had not returned when the small force set out
from Ham, having poled the protecting gulf.

All day they labored, wending along swift streams
whose banks the Lord had prinked with yellow flag
as he had primped the air with varied birdsong.
Without a fire they made camp and slept,
and rising when they spied the morning star,
they trudged from lauds to vespers, meeting no one. [\[38\]](#)
But now, among the branches, Alfred saw
young Aeffa, helmetless, his face aglow,
approaching with Witbrord, said royal envoy,
and a *geogub* of Athelheah's household. [\[39\]](#)

Who humbly knelt before him. "Lord," he uttered,
"I roamed until the bishop's pickets found me.
He stood beneath an oak, whose newborn leaves [\[40\]](#)
lay curled among their leathery precursors.
The waterfall of iron rings that poured
from his wide shoulders to his trunk-like thighs
towered over my head, a frozen cliff.
I spoke your word: 'Hopeless, the Romans fought.'
The man of God replied, 'And fighting, conquered.'" [\[41\]](#)

Now Ingeld's troubled scion rode apart.
As if a flood of feeling broke its dam,
stubborn remorse assailed him, and shame
at having watched marauders maul his flock,
and constant terror of discovery

endured for deadly weeks in Gormr's court.
Advancing through the gloom to Ecgbert's stone,[\[42\]](#)
erected by that king in imitation
of everlasting timbers reared at Avebury,
he apperceived Saint Aldhelm's eighth successor,
the *rector* of his *regnum's* western see,
his cousin, captain, crammer, and companion,
on foot beneath the undressed monument.
Beside him Alfsige stood, who ran his chapter;
Regenbald the reeve; Esne the priest,
who'd stewarded the bishop's rich estates;
Athelwulf and Athelhelm, two brothers;
Leofheah, the bishop's sister-son;[\[43\]](#)
and Beorhtwulf, who sowed far-scattered fields.

Frea defends us from the enfeebling grief,[\[44\]](#)
the sad disease, the burial alive
we suffer separated from our friends.
Before that moment, neither priest nor king
had plumbed the pit of sorrow in his heart,
but now the bishop fell to his stout knees
and fondled, fervently, his *frea's folma*.[\[45\]](#)
He kissed them, weeping, as the holy twelve
must have kissed the hands of their dear Healer,[\[46\]](#)
returned from hell and death on Pilate's tree,
and no one mocked the son of Athulf's tears[\[47\]](#)
or the strong sobs that shook the bishop's bulk.

"I heard you lost an eye," the bishop said,
the salty channels gleaming on his cheeks,
"but I believe you live. I scorn to beg
leave to touch the smooth stone in its socket."[\[48\]](#)

The seed of Ingeld hailed the Wiltshiremen
who'd left behind their overwelcoming chief:[\[49\]](#)
young Athelhelm, the shire's junior elder;
Sigewulf and Beornstan, stray guardsmen;
and, wonderfully, Wulfheard, Wulfhere's son,[\[50\]](#)

by whom recruited, heaven only knew.

He turned to greet the Hampshiremen and found
that Cuthred, his young alderman, had come,
although he'd married Wulfthryth, Wulfhere's daughter,
bringing his brothers, Tort- and Wulf- and Wigred.[\[51\]](#)
Alfred hailed the wrinkled, studious Hunsige;
the brothers Beorhtmund and Beorhtnoth,
who'd served with each of Alfred's elder brothers,
as had tough Cynelaf and Athelred,
true Hampshire thanes defecting from the foes;[\[52\]](#)
Dudig, Athelred, and Heremod,
three men who'd manned the works at Wareham with him;[\[53\]](#)
and dear Deormod, the latter's brother.

Depleted of his glee, the people's king[\[54\]](#)
unhappily lacked Eadwulf and Odda,
his princes of the Berks and Devon men.[\[55\]](#)
He beckoned to his chiefs. "No fires tonight,"
he said, "and no carousing in the camp."

They made their way to Iley, where they lay
at rest as Esne numbered all the men.[\[56\]](#)
There Alfred led a party through the trees
until they found a freshly flowering maple
(the wood the woodwrights worked to frame their harps),
which felled, they stripped and dressed in two bright beams,
the living wood the tint of shining skin.[\[57\]](#)
The seed of Ingeld crossed himself and said,
"With these we'll build the Danes a Grecian steed."

At dusk, the Saxons' evening meal done,[\[58\]](#)
the king addressed them from a fallen log.
Although no word, no men, had come from Devon
or Berkshire, it was time to launch the struggle.[\[59\]](#)
If they delayed, the Danes would slay them piecemeal[\[60\]](#)
and time and tide would fetch another fleet.

“*La, Seaxe,*” the seed of Scaef cried,
“our fathers won this land by God’s command.[\[61\]](#)
And now the Danes are here—we don’t know why—
to test us or requite our sinful deeds.[\[62\]](#)
We’ve drunk such poisonous shame that by his grace
alone do we yet live. Yet by his grace
we live, we muster here, we rest, eat, march
armed with the filed iron of his Word.
The Lord made earth and heaven.[\[63\]](#) Every day
he summons up the sun and wind and trees.
He molded us from soil and endowed
mankind with his spiritual image.[\[64\]](#)
Again, we don’t know why he sent the sailors,
but next to such astounding miracles,
to see his Saxon folk, his loyal sons,
recover their old homes is nothing to him.[\[65\]](#)

“On Aphek’s battleplain, King Ahab’s levy
slaughtered a hundred thousand Syrians
and proved *Tirfruma* rules both hill and vale.[\[66\]](#)
With but three thousand, Matathias’ son,
bold Judas, called the Hammer of the Lord,
dispersed an army many times as large
of Syrians and Greeks outside Emmaus.[\[67\]](#)
And when Northumbrian Oswy, nation’s king,
fought pagan Penda, godly Oswald’s slayer,
his Mercian foes had thrice his complement,
but *Frea* gave his son the victory
by Winwed’s flood, and gave him Penda’s head.[\[68\]](#)
For battles aren’t won by shield and sword,
or numbers, engines, silver, or full bellies,
but by a soul devoted to our Lord.[\[69\]](#)

“We are but three hundred eighteen men,
as many as the bishops in Nicea
who took our credo from the Holy Ghost.[\[70\]](#)
We have as many men as Abram brought

to battle in the war of the nine kings
to rescue captured Lot, his brother-son. [\[71\]](#)
Bede says that number signifies the tree,
the living timber of our Victory-Lord. [\[72\]](#)
The crosslike *tau* in Greek denotes three hundred,
I ten, *H* eight, meaning our Healer's beam.
We bear our *Frea's* rood to bruise the fiends,
as did fane-bearing Abram, figuring Christ. [\[73\]](#)
Another type of Christ, Melchizedek
blessed his triumphant band with bread and wine. [\[74\]](#)
Remember, when we march before the light,
what Leonidas said to his six hundred
before they met six hundred thousand Persians. [\[75\]](#)
'Break your fast,' the Spartan urged his spearmen,
'as though tonight you feasted with the dead.'

Oppressed with dread at wielding such slight force,
the seed of Ingeld, twenty-third successor
to Father Cerdic, rode with Athelheah
and spoke to holy Aldhelm's eighth successor:
"If I go down today, I beg you, bishop,
to crown my Edward king and serve as regent.
I pray my lord will fortify our towns
as Bacchides walled nine Judean burghs. [\[76\]](#)
Build ships, my friend, to interdict invaders
and to raze Danish ports with fire and sword.
We must have learned volumes in our tongue,
such as the great *De civitate dei*
the great Numidian wrote and great Charles studied. [\[77\]](#)
I fear the fiends will seize the atheling,
whom Parrett's ebbing waters will expose.
I fear they'll occupy each down and field,
each harbor, river, meadow, brook, and grove,
so long no man will know our Saxon name." [\[78\]](#)

The timid light that skulked among the trunks
revealed the bishop's meditative frown.

“Sufficient unto the day the ills thereof,”
said Athelheah. “*Genoh on hys ymbhogan.*
Diei sufficit malitia sua. [79]

I ask you, son, why did our *Dryhten* die? [80]
To spare his sheep the pains of death? Not so.
He died to spare us from the pangs of hell,
which, for our sins, we sons of Eve have earned
and which he too, despairing, has endured.
Despairing, he found souls chained to their torments
and evil fiends commissioned to mistreat them. [81]
But *Frea*, unfathered, fought for his friends.
He gave the word to those who loved the Lord [82]
(the *uuort* in Charles’s Old Franconian tongue),
and at his signal, all in unison
abruptly seized the ugly devils’ weapons, [83]
their mallets, flails, pruning hooks, and goads,
and, massing in a *caput porcinum*, [84]
rushed the arrogant gang that manned the gate.

“The fallen freed, our Lord returned to earth,
and since that time, his men have taught all mankind [85]
how we may march together, fight for him,
and live with him, forever, after Judgment.”

The Athulfing said nothing. He knew hell.
He’d gladly stake his life, his fame, his fate
to save the Seaxe and free his *freo*. [86]

As red as pig-iron in the forge’s jaws
the sun had blazed, then blinked and disappeared
behind the massive bastion of cloud,
when Gormr and his gang of tested captains
passed Cossington along the Roman highway.
King Eric’s bane, apart from that ill dread
that frets each warrior before engaging, [87]
was certain that his mailed men-at-arms
would quickly cut to shreds the slender cohort
his pickets had reported from afar,

apparently the Saxons' last attempt,
the most abundant bevy they could muster,
to knock the northmen's collar from their necks.[\[88\]](#)
Anticipating easy victory,
King Godfred's grandson yet was gratified
to think the stormclouds heaping the dark welkin,
beginning now to weep fat, limpid drops,
would curtain from their risen Savior's eye
the massacre of his miserable folk.

With no preliminary boasts or slurs,
the foemen met along a narrow front,
hurrying to their deaths as to their beds.
As quickening raindrops tapped both Dane and Saxon,
men thrust at throats, men swung at necks and flanks,
and grunts of pain and hatred graced the din
of iron and steel beating blade and shield.
Like wolves the Saxons fought, each warding strokes
directed at his neighbor as himself,
and bore appalling wounds until they stumbled,
languishing, as if drugged, from loss of blood.
The outnumbered natives held their ground
despite the rising ire of the Danes,
as Godfred's seed and Harald's son observed.[\[89\]](#)

"Grim!" cried Gormr, and his swordsmen echoed,[\[90\]](#)
"Grim!" and separated right and left,
for it was Grim who'd counseled Sigurd Ring
on how to counter Harald War-tooth's wedge.

"The swine!" cried Athelnoth, who swung his wings[\[91\]](#)
back to withstand the fiends' envelopment,
trusting in his Somersetan troop,[\[92\]](#)
the nobles and the freemen of the shire,
porcarii and foresters and sailors
and monks drawn from Blagdon Hythe and Banwell,
to execute in calculated steps,
not bolt in terror at the rowers' rage.

But sheer numbers surging on both flanks
threatened to overwhelm his weakening band.[\[93\]](#)
Instead of calling on his hard-pressed van
to split the tide of fiends and roll their right
over the cliff-like rim, he bawled aloud
for Somersetan churls to withdraw.

One half the little thicket disengaged[\[94\]](#)
and ran for their lives back up the Roman road.
The other half attacked ferociously,
resolved to halt the heathens at all costs
and find their fellows half a chance to flee.
Athelnoth and Garulf poured on blows,
despite the rain the wind whipped in their faces,[\[95\]](#)
hacking at Gorm's and Earl Halga's helms
and drawing younger *drengas* to their aid.[\[96\]](#)
Bellowing out the Frealafing's **nafn*,[\[97\]](#)
Gormr urged a vigilant pursuit,
refusing to buy back the feigned retreat
the Saxons swallowed, gullibly, at Wilton.[\[98\]](#)

He saw the thane of Somerton break off,[\[99\]](#)
leap down the slope, and gallop, slide, and roll.
He let the landsman go, lest tumbling rowers
lose the odds on rugged terrain.
Instead the sailors strode with steady step
along the road to the black-tented east,
exulting as they went to see their prey
fleeing like frightened sheep. They feared the foes
might scatter in the woods of Socombe Hill,
but soon the rump of Athelnoth's command
reformed, thinly, along the line of trees.

Meanwhile, Alfred, hidden in that same timber,
had stepped away, alone, to pray for strength,
though the black ashes rubbed into his visage[\[100\]](#)
felt hot, as if foretokening hellfire.
His heart ached in its cage, his innards churned

as if to purge his poisoned flesh of sin[101]
until, his weasand sucking spit, he choked
and choked as if to drown in the sopping air.
Is this the dragon's last attack? he asked, [102]
desperately drawing breath between the spasms.
Spare me, *Frea*, to do your work, he begged,
and spare your servant the indignity
of smothering in his own surging filth. [103]
But the filth climbed convulsively, a bitter
worm of mire birthed in his throat with woe. [104]
"And can you drain the cup," the Savior asked,
"prepared for me, the sin of the whole world?" [105]
He heaved, he hacked, he spat, he spat again—
an unseen angel chased away the fiend. [106]

King Athulf's son, secure in his reliance, [107]
body and soul, life and limb, on him, [108]
remounted to regain his waiting place.
He scarcely heard the progress of the fight
over the rain's *tæp tæp* on leaf and helm,
but in a pause he heard a mistle-thrush
hidden in the summit of an oak,
rejoicing in the gusting, drumming rain
as Saxon sailors sang in squalls at sea—
or so Sidonius wrote, a count of Gaul,
a bishop, and an emperor's son-in-law. [109]

A drenching gale whipped the rowers' backs
and drove them up the rise as toward a shore,
when suddenly the Thunderer unloosed
a blinding bolt that lit the open ground
in a strange, fitful burst of purplish light,
in which Jarl Gormr, murdered Godfred's grandson, [110]
half-dazzled, with a tingling in his scalp,
could see the features of his enemies. [111]
Were they a cohort ordered up from hell
to castigate the sailors for their crimes?

Or living men, who like the Harii,
to unnerve enemies, had dyed their hides?[\[112\]](#)
When the glare dissolved, an unearthly crash
and an earth-shattering racket crushed the air.

A war whoop rolled along the Saxon line,[\[113\]](#)
an "Alleluia!" sounding through the gloom,
and then another elf-shining stroke
lightened the green field and green hill.[\[114\]](#)
Godfred's seed, with shuddering heart, perceived
his foes had grown in numbers three-, fourfold,
and when the rattling peal rolled away
their alleluias likewise multiplied,
as once the Welshmen generaled by Germanus—
Armorica's *ex-dux bellorum*, then
antistes (bishop) of Antissiodorum—
as once the Welshmen bellowed "Alleluia!"
so loudly that they stunned the massing Saxons,
who threw away their weaponry and fled.[\[115\]](#)

Though shaken, Gormr stubbornly prepared
to marshal his attack, but heaven's Master
loosed another crackling, dazzling shaft,
revealing to the Dane's reluctant awe,
raised among the horrid, obverse troop,
a mailed ruler nailed to glowing studs,
the one-eyed steersman of those blackened spirits,
who Guthrum thought resembled buried Alfred.[\[116\]](#)

Arriving on his right, the rower reckoned
a mob of miners, Mendip men, the same
he'd pressed to trench his ditch and heap his ramparts,
appearing suddenly on Polden's brow
as though they'd scooped shallow graves in the hillside
awaiting their Redeemer's call to arms.
Assembled and commanded by young Bucca,
they wielded mattocks, picks, and whetted spades,[\[117\]](#)
and Somersetan swordsmen steeled their line,

for Saxon thanes, unlike the haughty Franks,
saw no disgrace in leading loyal churls
to slaughter and expel the northern oarsmen.[\[118\]](#)

Godrum felt the wet west wind swing north
as the spring shower turned to clattering hail,
but he and his grim Jutlanders stood fast
despite the godly terror in their hearts,
for they had heard the history of those heroes,
including hallowed Hrothulf, Halga's heir,
a hero other heroes gladly served,[\[119\]](#)
among them warlike Beorra, the werebear.
The tale told how Hrothulf and his hall-guards,
paying the price for Halga's match with Ursa,
his half-Saxon daughter, Hrothulf's dam,[\[120\]](#)
in a drawn-out, nighttime, nightmare fight at Leire,
succumbed to the unslaughterable host[\[121\]](#)
that Scyld, the king's half-elfish sister, gathered
to raze her brother's band and seize his throne.
No matter how hotly the heroes hewed,
how many liches mislaid limbs, they soon[\[122\]](#)
reformed and fought as fiercely as before,
until each fellow fell and gnawed the soil,[\[123\]](#)
including Beorra, in human form.

They knew, as well, of Harald War-tooth's doom
at Bravellir, where Woden, in the mold
of Bruni, Harald's charioteer and friend,
bumped the unsuspecting *rex* from his cart
and stove in his skull with his own club.[\[124\]](#)
So they stood fast, the master and his crewmen,
the irritated stranger recollecting
that the bastard West Saxon athelings numbered
King Scyld among their mottled ancestors.[\[125\]](#)

"Woden!" Gormr bellowed from his lungs,[\[126\]](#)
but just as he released his staggered throng,
the one-eyed specter sprang down from his scaffold,

for Alfred counted on the Lord to quell
the Danes as when he stunned the Midianites
by night with Gideon's lamps and jarring trumps.[\[127\]](#)

But Guthrum and his crews, despite the thunder,
despite the onset of exulting corpses,
despite the troll toiling under his token,
the White Christ under his battle-standard,
came on, and Alfred knew his plan had failed.[\[128\]](#)
He saw his Saxons faced an enemy
superior in numbers, craft, and arms,
as if the Savior had forsaken him
and his inspired men—as if he'd spurned
their faith to let them perish on that ridge,
forgotten in a year, a month, a day,[\[129\]](#)
though fame for any man, Augustine says,
is brief, an instant in eternity,
and published only in a narrow tract
of this small star, this stone, this mustard seed.[\[130\]](#)
Some days before, the lesser light had masked
the sun, a sign, said Werwulf, waxing vatic,
their slender corps would quench the northman's candle,
but now, the Saxon saw, the omen meant
the newly risen foe would quell his folk.[\[131\]](#)

So Alfred fought, and men around him fought,
closing with Gormr's rowers face-to-face,
like wretches who'd lost everything of worth,
their children, cattle, lands, their wives, their lives,
their weapons whetted by impending death.[\[132\]](#)
Then Alfred knew the Lord was not in the wind
that clamored like the voice of many waters;
was not in the rain or the helm-rattling hail[\[133\]](#)
that baptized Saxon men in Adam's ruin;
was not in the blinding lightning he sent down
as if to carbonize them with his Ghost,
but in the wordless spell that held its peace[\[134\]](#)

amid the scraping blades and grunts of hatred
uttered by men wielding and shunning judgment.

So Alfred fought, encouraged by his angel,
carving the necks and limbs of heathen fiends,
severing hands defiled with every sin,
breaking teeth with his hefty jeweled hilt,
(which housed a tusk of Peter's, brought from Rome),
and piercing, with his point, the plaited wire
in which the Danes believed as in their gods.[\[135\]](#)

Sherborne's lord commanded on the right,
where Polden's height fell gently towards the north,
his *gupleoma* guiding the Dorset men,[\[136\]](#)
while on the left, the thane of Somerton
led Somersetan men along the rim
of the pale pit that yawned beyond the ridge.
But where the sailors saw a stubborn scrum
of Saxons holding back their crowding lines,
the Saxons, though condemned to pain and death,
discerned that high among the glaring clouds
the heroes of our risen Healer's host,[\[137\]](#)
archangeli, virtutes, potestates,
throni, principatus, dominationes,[\[138\]](#)
equipped with godlike arms, fought on their side,
and as the Greeks and Romans held a god
might don a shipmate's or a kinsman's features,
the Saxons saw angelic radiance,
steadfastness, fighting spirit, strength, and love[\[139\]](#)
shining beneath their neighbors' iron helms,
as if familiar friends had been revealed
as our Redeemer's warlike choristers.[\[140\]](#)
They saw, moreover, that the Lord of Hosts,
Dryhten weroda, Dominus sabaoth,
by lending them his troops, had multiplied
by twenty, fifty times their tiny body
and promised them eternal victory.[\[141\]](#)

Gorm observed the one-eyed, mailed scarecrow storming among his oaks with hellish force, his cross behind him, bright on the black hill, and felt it only just that heaven's Lord should show himself to unbelieving Danes before he broke their board-burg, snapped their oars, and sentenced them to everlasting flames.[\[142\]](#) But by God's grace, the captain's spirit turned[\[143\]](#) to salvaging such men as might be spared. Today, he saw, his sailors would not scatter Saxons sheltered by their Savior's wings, but they might yet evade the killing edge-play[\[144\]](#) by backing under his consoling shadow.

Lord Halga also sensed that Ymme's Lord had opted to espouse the Saxon cause. Contented to do penance for the shame of Hrothulf's nonappearance in the field and on his own account, for the longstanding shame of having shunned his uncles' God[\[145\]](#) despite his fair apostle, whom he'd failed, he formed a rearguard of his Slesvig men and Frisians to secure their chief's retreat. They balked the Saxons' center and their **alfr*, but on the left, some oarsmen broke and bolted downward across the kind, inclining mead towards Ebandun's dear gardens, halls, and barns.[\[146\]](#)

But in their rear, which now was Gormr's van, the Jutlanders' reserves withdrew unhindered, on foot and horseback, painted boards intact,[\[147\]](#) past Chilton Polden, down the welcome grade past Cossington, and down the ridge towards Knowle, until they heard that Ymme's man had fallen[\[148\]](#) and Alfred's men were menacing their shoulders and Athelheah's Dorsetans and the men of Somerset, its swordsmen, monks, and miners,[\[149\]](#)

were slashing at their hocks and downing stragglers.

Then the rearward stream became a flood
as fiends were seized with terror of the Lord
who lashed them into a stampede, like beasts, [\[150\]](#)
and now the sodden, trodden turf was burdened
with loose limbs and bloody trunks of men
and dumb faces gaping up at the clouds
as Danes feebly parried the Saxons' fury
with bent blades and mutilated shields. [\[151\]](#)

Men died and horses died as Godfred's grandson
and Hrut's two sons and other steers- and crewmen
struggled to mount and quit the slaughterfield,
but hacked Halga's Slesvig men and Frisians
and other thinning threads of champions,
instructed in the iron law of war,
stayed on to hold the wind-whipped, rain-whipped ridge [\[152\]](#)
and pay the debt of death that all men owe-
and not men only, but the lovely gods
like Balder, bored by oathless mistletoe,
like him the harried Christian herd adored,
the gibbeted magician, now their Lord, [\[153\]](#)
who fell headlong to hell but re-upwelled,
a life-giving spring for those who love him-

and now the downpour transformed to a snowstorm,
stinging and blinding those who fled the fight
as when, after a night of tears and prayer
and visits by two armed and mounted saints,
the emperor, the first called Theodosius,
ambushed by Arbogast, the Frankish count-
who fought to keep Eugenius on the throne
whereon he'd placed the *rhetor* as his puppet,
likely having hanged poor Valentinian-
in a steep notch of the so-called Julian Alps,
broke out of his forlorn encirclement
when the Lord loosed a whirlwind that wrenched

the rebel legions' shields from their arms
and blew their arrows back on their own eyes.[\[154\]](#)

Some fellows galloped through the villages[\[155\]](#)
and rushed into the reeds that rimmed the moor,
but most lumbered heavily down the road,
half-maddened, with the Saxons at their heels,
too hurried to discard their ponderous mail,
and now the sun cut through the silver cover
and the green hillsides shone like emerald walls
or emerald surges menacing the shore[\[156\]](#)
against the iron-gray of the lingering storm,
as fat, untiring flakes, as white as wool,[\[157\]](#)
cascaded down from heaven's crowded towers
and boiled upwards from below the ridge
like flocks and herds and companies of spirits,
converging, swarming, yearning to observe
a struggle for the destiny of men.

"Another wonder," Godfred's grandson groaned,[\[158\]](#)
careering on his worried horse among[\[159\]](#)
the reckless rout of foreign fugitives.
His forward force was tumbling towards the fort[\[160\]](#)
like swine running screaming into the sea.
"Another miracle!" acknowledged Alfred.
Not far ahead, the bishop called, "Behold!"
and pointed skyward with his two-edged staff.
Uplifting his good eye, the *guma* saw
the wheel of the *Wuldorcyning's* war-car[\[161\]](#)
coruscating with his exorbitant glory,
enfolded in the flying, fiery feathers
and flaming flanks and haunches of his team
victoriously trampling down the turmoil.
"I-H-S," cried Alfred, "*in hoc signo!*"

They neared the devils' dike, which bulked above[\[162\]](#)
the swamped heap of tents, to find a mortal
trial underway along the ramp.

The seed of Scaef saw from where he sat
that his small force now held the fort's approaches,
but also that some foes yet hoped to win
the mouth of safety, fanged like Paradise.

He kicked his mount to order back his men [\[163\]](#)
before the Danes drove them into the ditch
and slaughtered them like surplus hogs in autumn.
Too late: he heard a steersman shout, and crowds
of arrows spitted his astonished friends. [\[164\]](#)
Men grunted and fell dead, while those who lived
waggled their gnawed shields left and right.
The *rex* rode on, exhorting uselessly,
exhausted, impotent, and void of hope, [\[165\]](#)
while arrows, stones, and beams beat down his force
as unwanted hail murders wheatfields,
and saw the stronghold's jaws pushed open wide,
though Saxons set their shoulders to the boards.
And now the wet west wind, with whelming power, [\[166\]](#)
scourged the invaders' eyes with whirling ash,
baffling them and blackening their hearts
so cruelly that they cursed the *cræft* of spells [\[167\]](#)
and raved and roared in terror at the swarm
of hornets armed like Grecian cavalry,
with eyes like men's and women's whipping hair,
and the milk teeth of juvenile wolves. [\[168\]](#)

And all the sons of Cerdic saw this work:
the gusting snowstorm turned into a mass
of little, chalk-white butterflies that flew [\[169\]](#)
into the faces of the fearful fiends [\[170\]](#)
and flung them, flailing, from their parapets
and quelled the killing counterstroke they'd launched
to countermand and cross our Judge's doom. [\[171\]](#)
And now the sun broke through anew and drenched
the grassy slopes and level beds of reeds
that swayed among their elders' skeletons

with a clear glare, the splendor of his glory
the prophet witnessed soaring over the temple.[\[172\]](#)
And *Sigedryhten*, our Redeemer, drew
the jeweled and vaulted bow of righteousness,
which only he, the Most High, can handle,
and hung it on the slate-gray eastern sky,
a pledge, it seemed, the Saxons would regain
their sway over the eastern underkingdoms.[\[173\]](#)

The blinking, racing creatures of the breeze
surged in a churning pillar from the fort
and, incandescing as they came about,
hovered, churning, over the Saxons' heads,
now bright as chalk, now dim, dim, bright, dim, bright,
before descending into an orchard, where,
alighting on the flowering apple trees
(the wood on which our *Cyning* gave his life)
that blanketed the knees of the green hill
in a rose billow, like a virgin snowfield
blushing at dawn or hurrying the gloom,
they turned the winsome, glowing cloud one white.[\[174\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) K. Godfred d. 810; *afspriki (OE)

[\[2\]](#) Woden; *Pur, *bærn (OE); Trinity (OE)

[\[3\]](#) *faþur, *bloþ, *Mariu Sunr (OE)

[\[4\]](#) *uir, *bok, *almr, *borþuækr (OE)

[\[5\]](#) *kimsmin (OE); K. Harald Klak acc. 812, 819, 825

[\[6\]](#) *rein, rulers (OE)

[\[7\]](#) *Ruulf (OE)

- [8] *Sikurþr (0E)
- [9] *Helki, *Himik, *Kristn (0E)
- [10] *þekil (0E)
- [11] *halr, *runar (0E)
- [12] *suiarp (0E)
- [13] *lakstapin, *utauplikr (0E)
- [14] *Tanskar trotni, *Tanskr, *flokr, *tiald (0E)
- [15] *Toki, *hal, *flotnar (0E)
- [16] *bior (0E)
- [17] *bryniur, *benlaksar (wound-salmon), *naut, *suin, *saupir (0E)
- [18] *Kurmr (0E)
- [19] R. Tamar
- [20] *Tanir, *faburbrupur (0E); ct. of Dorestad
- [21] d. 870; d. 867; d. 867; d. 871
- [22] *Krimr (0E)
- [23] Eric s. of Hemming vs. Eric s. of Godfred; *Open (0E)
- [24] Wulfhere; *braki (0E)
- [25] *trutnik (0E)
- [26] Dumgarth; *kunuk (0E)
- [27] Toca; *skalt (0E)
- [28] *søkr (0E)
- [29] *kar (0E)

[30] *provastar (0E)

[31] *lif (0E)

[32] *sunr (0E)

[33] *skapsmip, mind-smith, *nafn, *banahak (0E)

[34] *uaralt (0E)

[35] Wulfhere ald. of Wiltshire; Odda ald. of Devon; Bp. Athelheah; Eadwulf ald. of Berkshire; 871

[36] ald. of Dorset; Tunbert bp. of Winchester; Jan. 6, 878; High-Lord (0E)

[37] flod, six (0E)

[38] fyr, morgensteorra (0E)

[39] bogas, boda, youth (0E)

[40] leaf (0E)

[41] Orosius bk. iv

[42] stan (0E)

[43] swistorsunu (0E)

[44] the Lord (0E)

[45] hands (0E)

[46] Hælend (0E)

[47] maga Æthulfs (0E)

[48] John 20:25-29

[49] Wulfhere

[50] bearn (0E)

- [\[51\]](#) broþor (0E)
- [\[52\]](#) fiend (0E)
- [\[53\]](#) þry menn (0E)
- [\[54\]](#) leodcyning (0E)
- [\[55\]](#) Defnas (0E)
- [\[56\]](#) weg, secgas (0E)
- [\[57\]](#) mapultreow, wudu, wyrhtan, scinn (0E)
- [\[58\]](#) æfenmete (0E)
- [\[59\]](#) camp (0E)
- [\[60\]](#) bitmælum (0E)
- [\[61\]](#) O Saxons, Godes willa (0E)
- [\[62\]](#) firenweorc (0E)
- [\[63\]](#) Liffrea (0E)
- [\[64\]](#) monkyn, onlicness (0E)
- [\[65\]](#) scipmenn, suna (0E)
- [\[66\]](#) oretfeld, fyrd (0E); 1 Kings 20:29; Source-God (0E)
- [\[67\]](#) þry þusend, magu, bald (0E); 1 Macc. 4:13
- [\[68\]](#) þeodcyning, fa (0E); Nov. 15, 655
- [\[69\]](#) beadwa, bord, brond, seolfur (0E)
- [\[70\]](#) þry hundeahtatyne (0E); 325; Heahgæst (0E)
- [\[71\]](#) Gen. 14:14; camp, nigon cyningas, broþorsunu (0E)
- [\[72\]](#) Sigedryhten (0E)

- [\[73\]](#) fiend, segnberend (0E)
- [\[74\]](#) hlaf and win (0E)
- [\[75\]](#) uhtantid (0E); Orosius bk. ii
- [\[76\]](#) 2 Macc. 9:50-52; burga (0E)
- [\[77\]](#) St. Augustine of Hippo d. 430; Emp. Charles d. 814
- [\[78\]](#) wætru, dun, feld, hæfen, stream, mædwa, broc, holt (0E)
- [\[79\]](#) Matt. 6:34
- [\[80\]](#) Lord (0E)
- [\[81\]](#) yfel (0E)
- [\[82\]](#) word (0E)
- [\[83\]](#) wæpen (0E)
- [\[84\]](#) boar's head formation (L)
- [\[85\]](#) menn, moncynn (0E)
- [\[86\]](#) Saxons, lady (0E)
- [\[87\]](#) *bani, *trek (0E)
- [\[88\]](#) *halsar (0E)
- [\[89\]](#) *sap, *barn (0E)
- [\[90\]](#) *Krimr, *kumnar (0E)
- [\[91\]](#) swin (0E)
- [\[92\]](#) truma (0E)
- [\[93\]](#) werod (0E)
- [\[94\]](#) piccet (0E)

- [\[95\]](#) ren, wind (0E)
- [\[96\]](#) soldiers (0E)
- [\[97\]](#) Woden; name (0E)
- [\[98\]](#) 871
- [\[99\]](#) *þekn (0E)
- [\[100\]](#) andsyn (0E)
- [\[101\]](#) flæsc, firen (0E)
- [\[102\]](#) draca (0E)
- [\[103\]](#) Lord (0E); servus (L); fylþ (0E)
- [\[104\]](#) wýrm (0E)
- [\[105\]](#) fæt, Hælend (0E); Matt. 20:22
- [\[106\]](#) engel, feond (0E)
- [\[107\]](#) K. Athelwulf d. 858
- [\[108\]](#) lic and sawel (0E)
- [\[109\]](#) bp. of Auvergne d. 489; Emp. Avitus 455–456; apum (0E)
- [\[110\]](#) *sunarsunr (0E)
- [\[111\]](#) *sakutulkar (0E)
- [\[112\]](#) Tacitus, *Germania* ch. 43
- [\[113\]](#) *hærob (0E)
- [\[114\]](#) *grøn, *ualr, *fial (0E)
- [\[115\]](#) St. Germanus bp. of Auxerre d. 448; war leader; 429
- [\[116\]](#) *hæra, *sturimatr, *traukar (0E)

- [117] mattucas, beccan, scofla (0E)
- [118] nobles killed peasant leaders 859; reðran (0E)
- [119] Saxo bk. ii
- [120] *totur (0E)
- [121] *þiklipi (0E)
- [122] *lik (0E)
- [123] *filak (0E)
- [124] *uakn (0E); Saxo bk. viii
- [125] Saxo bk. i
- [126] *0pen (0E)
- [127] Jud. 7:19-20
- [128] *takn, *Hoitakristr, *hærkubl (0E)
- [129] gear, monþ, dæg (0E)
- [130] stan, senepsæd (0E)
- [131] fah, folc (0E)
- [132] wreccan, cildru, feoh, land, wif, lif, wæpen (0E)
- [133] wind (0E); 1 Kings 19:11-12; ren, hægel (0E)
- [134] Gæst, spell (0E)
- [135] engel, fiend, handa, teþ, gimmisc, hilt, tusc, herepada (war-shirts), godu (0E)
- [136] war-lamp (0E); Dornsæte, þegn (0E)
- [137] hæle, Hælend (0E)
- [138] archangels, virtues, powers, thrones, principalities,

dominions

[139] soþfæstness, ellen, eafop (0E)

[140] Onliesend (0E)

[141] truman, corþer, sige (0E)

[142] *treman, *krus, *Ifnatrutin, *untroapir, *Tanir, *borþburk (0E)

[143] *ont (0E)

[144] *Saksar, *eklaikir (0E)

[145] *Kup (0E); Harald & Eric ss. of K. Hemming

[146] elf (0E); Edington (0E); *kraskarþar, *hus, *lapar (0E)

[147] *hiltiborþ (0E)

[148] *uar (0E)

[149] *trekiar, *mokar (0E)

[150] Jud. 7:22-25; 1 Sam. 14:15

[151] *skialtir (0E)

[152] *rukr (0E)

[153] *Trutin (0E)

[154] apostles John and Philip; Emp. Theodosius I d. 395; Emp. Valentinian II d. 392; Sept. 6, 394; Orosius bk. vii

[155] *kumnar (0E)

[156] *grønar, *brenkur, *ranir, *stront (0E)

[157] *ul (0E)

[158] *untr (0E)

[\[159\]](#) *uik (OE)

[\[160\]](#) *treburk (OE)

[\[161\]](#) man,

Glory-King (OE)

[\[162\]](#) dic (OE)

[\[163\]](#) eh (OE)

[\[164\]](#) stræla (OE)

[\[165\]](#) meðig, mihtleas (OE)

[\[166\]](#) westanwind (OE)

[\[167\]](#) strength (OE)

[\[168\]](#) Rev. 9:7-10

[\[169\]](#) fifeldan (OE)

[\[170\]](#) fiend (OE)

[\[171\]](#) Demend (OE)

[\[172\]](#) gleomu, witga, templ (OE); Ezek. 10:18

[\[173\]](#) Victory-Lord (OE); rihtwisnys, Heahgod, wedd (OE)

[\[174\]](#) æppeltun, æppeltreow (OE); King (OE); cneow, grene, hylde, glom, wynsum, wolcn, hwit (OE)

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