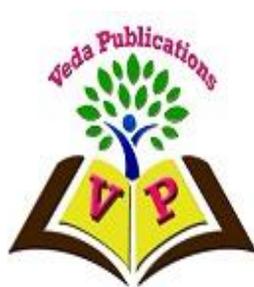


**MANUSCRIPTS OF ANGLO-SAXON PROSE AND POETRY**

Dr. P. Prasantham

*(Assoc. Professor of English, Aditya Institute of Technology and Management, Tekkali, Srikakulam, AP)*DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2022.9214>**ABSTRACT**

There are actually four manuscripts in which Old English or Anglo-Saxon poetry is preserved. The vast majority of all extant Old English poetry is contained in these four books. Though damaged partially, they are safe today at various places. These manuscripts are mainly known as *The Exeter Book*, *Junius Manuscript*, *Nowell Codex* and *Vercelli Book*. These books are unique in their own way. These manuscripts are the only sources by which we would know something of Old English poetry or prose today. In this paper, I would try to give brief explanation of how significant these manuscripts are in connection with Old English literature. The Old English Period or the Anglo-Saxon Period begins from the fifth century till 1066 i.e. from the arrival of Jutes, Angles and Saxons into England around 450 AD until the Norman Conquest in 1066. During this period, lot of literature was written anonymously; most of the poems were not titled; lot many works were burnt; some works were also lost due to invasions; everything had to be written manually due to lack of printing press; until first printing press was introduced in England by William Caxton in 1476, there was hardly any guaranty for the survival of any work; so survival of any text should be treated as a 'luck'. Despite all these problems, there are some important works which could survive and are preserved in four manuscripts, which I will discuss in this paper.

**Keywords :** *The Exeter Book, Junius Manuscript, Nowell Codex, Vercelli Book*



THE EXETER BOOK

When we think of manuscripts of Old English poetry, first one that strikes our brain is the Exeter Book, commonly known as the Codex Exoniensis or Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501. This is the largest and possibly the earliest known manuscript of Old English literature. It is uncertain as when it was composed but it is estimated that it might have been composed in the late tenth century i.e. between 960 and 990. It was copied from a variety of exemplars by a single scribe. In 1072, Leofric, the first bishop of Exeter, donated the book to the Exeter Cathedral library. I mycel Englisc boc be gehwilcum ingum on leo-wisan geworht: "one huge English book on many subjects, penned in verse form" was one of the property he donated in his testament to the then-poverty monastery at Exeter (the predecessor to the later cathedral). Scholars have commonly identified this manuscript as the Exeter Codex. However, Leofric's bequest occurred at least three generations after the book was written, and it is often assumed that it came from somewhere else. According to Patrick Conner, the original scribe who penned the text did so in three different handwritten booklets, which were ultimately assembled into the Exeter Book codex. A lot of meetups and pages are missing. Antiquarians Laurence Nowell and George Hickes added marginalia to the manuscript in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, respectively.

The Exeter Book is entirely composed of poetry. This manuscript is also significant for its accommodating two poems signed by Cynewulf, one of only twelve Old English poets whose names are familiar to us. Poems included in the Exeter Book are arranged haphazardly with no title. Sometimes it is

very difficult to find out where some poem begins and ends. A little initial was used to show demarcation between every two poems. This unnumbering of the poems caused later editors to assign whatever title they felt while reading.

Poems in the Exeter Book demonstrate Anglo-Saxon literary culture's intellectual sophistication. Unlike the Junius manuscript which is exclusively devoted to biblical stories, poems of the Exeter Book are of different genres and show diverse range of themes. This manuscript covers gnomic poetry, elegiac verse, saint's lives, wisdom poems, heroic poems, around 100 riddles etc. Death, alienation, desolation, long passage of time, lengthy separation of lovers, loss, terrors and charms of the sea and social exile are among the timeless universal themes explored in the elegies. We meet lonely seaman, exiled wanderers, and estranged lovers via them. The riddles, written in the traditional alliterative style of Old English poetry, look at the universe through the lens of everyday life. Their subjects, which range from holy to commonplace, are presented in an oblique and elliptical style, making it difficult for the reader to figure out what they are all about.

The Exeter Book contains the "elegies": "The Wife's Lament," "The Husband's Message," "The Ruin," "The Wanderer," "The Seafarer," "The Riming Poem," and the gnomic verses, "Widsith," "Deor" and "Wulf and Eadwacer." This manuscript also contains following poems: *Christ I, II, III, Guthlac A and B, Azarias, The Phoenix, Juliana, The Gifts of Men, Precepts, Vainglory, The Fortunes of Men, Maxims I, The Order of the World, The Panther, The Whale, The Partridge, Soul and Body II, Riddles 1-57/59, The Judgment Day I, Resignation, The Descent into Hell,*



Alms-Giving, Pharaoh, The Lord's Prayer I, Homiletic Fragment II, Riddle 28b / 30b, Riddle 58 / 60, Riddles 59-91/ 61-95.

In 2016, UNESCO honoured the Exeter Book stating that it is "the foundation volume of English literature, one of the world's principal cultural artefacts." The University of Exeter Digital Humanities team digitised the manuscript, which was supported by the University Provosts Fund and generated through a cooperation between the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral and the University of Exeter.

JUNIUS MANUSCRIPT

Among all manuscripts of Old English poetry and prose, Junius manuscript is the one which confined itself only to Biblical subjects. This manuscript was divided into two halves, one of which was completed around 1000 and the other in the first half of the eleventh century. It was most likely written in Malmesbury or Canterbury's Christ Church. Poems in this manuscript are untitled as is the case with most Anglo-Saxon poetry. This manuscript consists of four poems titled by modern editors such as *Genesis, Exodus, Daniel, and Christ and Satan*. While composing this work, lot of vacant spaces were left for the inclusion of illustrations. This drawing scheme suggests that this manuscript was meant for devotional purpose. Unfortunately, the illustration plan was not completed, and only two-thirds of *Genesis* has graphics.

Early scholars thought it was the work of the poet Caedmon, because Bede describes Caedmon as a cowherd who sang about "the creation of the world, the origin of the human race, and the whole

history of Genesis, and the departure of Israel from Egypt" in his Ecclesiastical History of the English Speaking People. However, it is now known that the document incorporates works by multiple authors.

Genesis

Genesis, the first poem of the Junius manuscript, has two different parts which are designated as Genesis A and Genesis B. Genesis A covers up to chapters 1 – 22 of the Bible's first book, which recounts the world's creation, Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden, and Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Genesis B is all about the Fall. Genesis is a 2,936-line poem. The first 234 lines explain the angels' fall and other aspects of creation. Lines 235–851 give a second narrative of angels' fall and relate of man's fall. These lines are interpolated based on their sequence, style, and higher quality. Genesis B is the name given to this portion, which was eventually identified as a translation of an Old Saxon source. This translation theory was first proposed on metrical grounds by the German scholar Sievers in 1875, and then confirmed in 1894 by the discovery of an Old Saxon verse fragment that appears to correspond to part of the work. Because of the manuscript's many striking similarities to *Paradise Lost*, it's possible that John Milton was aware of it.

Exodus

Exodus is the shortest poem of all in this manuscript. This is an unfinished poem with 590 lines and is treated as older than Genesis or Daniel. This poem tells the account of the Jews' exodus from Egypt and the Red Sea's parting. This story of exodus is not narrated in the way it is described in the Bible. In the Bible, Moses is seen as God's anointed whereas in



the Exodus of this manuscript, he is seen as an army general. All fighting scenes use military imagery. Narration of this story is interrupted by the depiction of the stories of Noah and Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Edward B. Irving edited this poem twice, in 1955 and 1981. He stated in the first edition that Noah and Abraham piece is a separate poem but later he admitted that it was an integral part of the Exodus poem.

Daniel

Daniel, a 764-line incomplete poem, is a scholastic composition that closely follows the Vulgate Book of Daniel but is far inferior in literary quality than Exodus. The first six chapters of Daniel's book are covered in a brief paraphrase, focusing on the narrative of the Fiery Furnace in particular and the description of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams.

Christ and Satan

This poem has 729 lines and is depicted in three parts. This is a unique poem in the sense that it deals with the New Testament of the bible. This poem narrates the Fall of Satan, Christ's harrowing of Hell (Christ's journey into hell after his death), and a narrative of Christ's temptation in the desert by Satan. Three scribes used a later type of handwriting to copy this poem.

NOWELL CODEX

Thirdly, we can talk of Nowell Codex which is one of the four great Anglo-Saxon poetic manuscripts. At least two manuscripts have been combined to create the current codex. The main separation is into two completely separate books that were not tied together until the seventeenth century. The first of these, which was once owned by Southwick Priory in

Hampshire and contains four works of prose, dated from the 12th century.

The second, older manuscript is the one that is more well-known. The Nowell Codex is named after the antiquarian Laurence Nowell, whose name is recorded on the first page of the text; he was likely its owner in the mid-16th century. It was eventually merged with the initial codex. Sir Robert Cotton bought it after that. It was put on the first shelf (A) of his library as the 15th manuscript (XV) of the bookcase with a bust of Emperor Vitellius, thus giving the collection its name. The Nowell Codex is thought to have been written about the year 1000. A possible date in the decade after 1000 has been mentioned in recent editions.

First codex

The first codex comprises four Old English prose works: a copy of Alfred's translation of Augustine's Soliloquies, a translation of Nicodemus' Gospel, the prose Solomon and Saturn, and a portion of Saint Quentin's life.

Second codex

The second codex includes a fragment of "The Life of Saint Christopher," the "Wonders of the East," (a description of several far-off locations and their fascinating inhabitants) and "Letters of Alexander to Aristotle," as well as a poetic translation of "Judith" after *Beowulf*. Because of the significance of *Beowulf*, the Nowell Codex is commonly referred to simply as The Beowulf manuscript. The manuscript, along with the rest of the Cotton collection, is housed in the British Library. The codex's varied contents have sparked a lot of discussion about why these particular works were chosen for inclusion. One explanation



that has garnered a lot of traction is that the compilers perceived a thematic link: all five works deal with monsters or monstrous behaviour in some way.

The only surviving manuscript of Beowulf

Beowulf is an Old English epic poem that only exists in a single copy in the Nowell Codex manuscript. It doesn't have a title in the original manuscript, but it's become recognised by the hero's name. The poem is only known from a single copy, which is thought to have been written between 975 and 1025. The book either dates from the time of Thelred the Unready or from the start of Cnut the Great's reign in 1016. The Nowell Codex is the name given to the Beowulf manuscript by its 16th-century owner and scholar Laurence Nowell. The earliest surviving mention to the Nowell Codex dates from around 1650, and the codex's previous ownership before Nowell is unknown. Around a letter exchange in 1700, the Beowulf manuscript is acknowledged by name for the first time. The manuscript was damaged by fire in 1731, with the margins burned and some readings lost. While rebinding efforts saved the manuscript from further deterioration, they also obscured other letters of the poem, resulting in significant loss. The Nowell Codex is now housed in the British Library and is on display. Opinions differ on whether Beowulf was composed in the 8th century or whether the poem's composition was contemporaneous with its 11th-century text. Before being recorded in its current form, a proto-version of the poem may have been passed down orally for many centuries. J. R. R. Tolkien felt that the poem preserved a real memory of Anglo-Saxon paganism, and that it was written

only a few generations after England was Christianized around AD 700.

Beowulf

Over three thousand alliterative verses make up the Beowulf poem. It is considered to be one of the most important pieces of Old English literature. The "Beowulf poet," as scholars refer to him, is an unnamed poet. The story takes place in the 6th century in Scandinavia. The hero, Beowulf, leaves his house and travels to the Danes' king, whose mead hall has been attacked by a monster known as Grendel. Grendel's mother attacks the hall after Beowulf kills Grendel, and she is defeated as well. Beowulf, victorious, returns to his homeland and ascends to the throne. Beowulf fights a dragon fifty years later, but is terminally wounded in the battle. His disciples cremate his body and create a tower on a cliff in his honour after he dies.

Beowulf and J. R. R. TOLKIEN

Tolkien began a translation of Beowulf in the 1920s, which he completed but did not publish. More than 40 years after Tolkien's death, it was ultimately edited by his son and released in 2014. Tolkien did, however, utilise his translation to deliver a well-received lecture titled "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," which had a lasting impact on Beowulf studies. Tolkien established the importance of the work's poetic essence over its strictly linguistic features. Tolkien would open his Beowulf lectures with a resounding "Hwaet!" (the first word of Beowulf and several other Old English poems). In a mead hall, it was his portrayal of an Anglo-Saxon bard. *Beowulf* was a tremendous piece of dramatic poetry for Tolkien, and he presented it in a dramatic



manner. When W. H. Auden wrote to Tolkien, his former professor, decades later, he said:

"I don't think that I have ever told you what an unforgettable experience it was for me as an undergraduate, hearing you recite Beowulf. The voice was the voice of Gandalf."

Tolkien claimed that the author of *Beowulf* was speaking about human destiny in general, rather than tribal politics in particular. As a result, the monsters were crucial to the poem's success. Tolkien held *Beowulf* in high regard, and his Middle-earth legends were influenced by him. He stated:

"Beowulf is among my most valued sources."

Condition of the manuscript

The Nowell Codex was penned by two people. The first hand runs from the start of the manuscript (fol. 94a) to the word *scýran* in *Beowulf*'s line 1939; the second hand runs from *moste* in that same line to the end of *Judith*. Although the scribes behind the two hands are contemporaneous, the second hand appears to "belong to an older school of insular writing than its companion hand," according to Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie.

When the Cotton library was partially destroyed by fire in 1731, the volume was severely damaged. While the volume itself survived, the edges of the pages were extensively burnt; no substantial repair attempts were made until the 19th century, by which time the margins had irrevocably collapsed, and many pages' edges are now illegible. Three pages, fol. 182a, fol. 182b, and fol. 201b, are in very bad form, with many words faded or unintelligible, some of which are far from the leaf's edges, indicating greater damage than can be explained by the Cottonian fire.

The damage to the third of these pages, according to Van Kirk Dobbie, was caused by *Beowulf* being separated from *Judith* before the 17th century, and fol. 201b was on the manuscript's outside, with no binding to keep it safe. However, he provides no explanation for the state of the first two pages.

The Nowell Codex's harm can be mitigated to varying degrees. The above-mentioned three pages in poor condition were examined under ultraviolet light, and the results were published. There are three current transcriptions of this section of the manuscript. After the Cottonian fire in 1786-1787, two of these transcriptions, known as A and B, were prepared under the direction of Grimur Jonsson Thorkelin, the first editor of *Beowulf*, in the years 1786-1787, before the manuscript had deteriorated as far as it has now. An unidentified professional copyist created Transcript A, while Thorkelin created Transcript B. Franciscus Junius made the third transcript (MS Junius 105, now in the Bodleian Library) of the *Judith* poem between 1621 and 1651. Junius' transcription, a meticulous copy of the poem with only a few faults, preserves the poem's text before it was damaged by fire.

VERCELLI BOOK

The Vercelli Book, also known as the Latin Codex Vercellensis, is an Old English manuscript from the late 10th century. It includes the text of *Andreas*, two poems by Cynewulf, *The Dream of the Rood*, a "Address of the Saved Soul to the Body," and a fragment of a homiletic poetry, as well as 23 prose homilies and the *Vercelli Guthlac*, a literary life of St. Guthlac.



The anonymous *Dream of the Rood*, regarded as one of the great masterpieces of Anglo-Saxon language, is arguably the most famous and maybe the most touching. The poem, which is written in the form of a dream vision, depicts the account of Christ's crucifixion from the perspective of the tree that was felled to create the cross on which he was crucified. It shares an interest in the cross as a devotional item with *Elene*. (This is fitting given that the Cathedral of Saint Eusebius in Vercelli has a colossal Romanesque crucifix made of wood covered in silver and engraved on the front, which stands above the altar.) It dates from the late tenth century. The *Dream of the Rood* is preserved in two versions: in the Vercelli Book and in a shortened form etched in runes on the Ruthwell Cross in the Scottish Borders in the eighth century.

The book got its name after it was discovered in 1822 in the cathedral library of Vercelli, in northern Italy. The manuscript's marginalia show that it was used in English in the 11th century. One of the many Anglo-Saxon pilgrims on their journey to Rome most likely brought it to Italy. The Biblioteca Capitolare in Vercelli, Northern Italy, houses the Vercelli Book. It was produced by one scribe in the second half of the 10th century and contains six verse pieces and 23 prose homilies.

The poem elements are blended together with prose in three groupings that are arbitrarily positioned. The evidence implies that the scribe put the material together over a long period of time. In *Old and Middle English: An Anthology*, Elaine Treharne suggests: "The texts suggest the compiler was someone in a monastic setting who wanted to demonstrate his personal interest in penitential and

eschatological themes and to glorify the ascetic way of life, despite the fact that the examples are diverse and there is no apparent chronological or formal arrangement. The homilies are part of an Anglo-Saxon England tradition of anonymous religious prose writing".

Several research projects have focused on the Vercelli Book since 2005. It was produced as part of a Vercelli School of Medieval European Palaeography partnership between the Biblioteca Capitolare and the University of Goettingen. In addition, with the help of Italian and foreign scholars, the Biblioteca Capitolare has been digitising, virtual restoration, and non-invasive chemical examination of the manuscript.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dr. P. Prasantham is currently working as an Associate Professor of English at Aditya Institute of Technology and Management, Tekkali, Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh, India. He did his MA from Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India and was awarded Ph.D. as well by the same university in 2014. His research interests include English Literature, Indian Writing in English, Post Colonial Literature and Contemporary Literature. He delivers lectures on English Language and Literature, and trains undergraduates in Language Proficiency.

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