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Codex Exoniensis, fols. 123b-124b:
An Old English Poetic Romano-British Arts Encomium

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Codex Exoniensis, fols. 123b-124b, commonly called The Ruin, is an Old English poem that has suffered both from physical damage, and from a kind of interpretive “damage,” the result of critical resignation in response to the work’s physical condition, revealing itself as much in continued critical acceptance of the work’s title as in continued acceptance of the critical assumption that the work’s total effect is forever lost to us. Enough of the poem’s whole and fragmentary lines exist, however, to confirm the purpose of two distinct emphases that draw attention to a yearning for restoration of the cultural traditions once shaping and stabilizing Roman-occupied Britain. These emphases consist of two perceptual acts in an imagined past. The first is the implicit act of looking forward toward imminent restoration of a Romano-British fortress-city that has suffered cataclysmic destruction at the hand of the barbarian. The second is the implicit act of looking backward from the same imagined temporal vantage point to the fortress-city’s heyday to appreciate fully the various arts, engineering and otherwise, that once, through their mastery and practical application, insured the stability of the nearly-four-hundred-year-long Roman occupation of Britain, making life livable and comfortable for those of the ‘far-flung kingdom’ stationed in Britannia.

While the Exeter Book continues to attract scholarly attention, critical interest during the last three decades in one of its most puzzling works, Codex Exoniensis, fols. 123b-124b, or The Ruin, as it came to be known in the nineteenth century, has dropped off considerably.

1 Leo, Carmen, as the complete title of his study suggests, was one of the first to entitle the Old English poem as The Ruin, identifying the work’s emphasis upon destruction.

2 While the 1990s witnessed at least three studies fully devoted to the poem, in the next decade, of the six studies treating the work thematically and textually, at least three incorporated this critical assumption about the poem’s emphasis upon destruction as part of broader examinations of other issues arising in other Old English works. In the following decade, two studies focused on how the poet historicizes Anglo-Saxon society through the imagined experience of Roman ruins. These studies, chronologically, include Morgan and McAllister, “Introduction: The Ruin,” 106-08; Klinck, The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition, 61-63, 70, 103-05, 208-19; and Znojemská, “The Ruin,” 15-33; in the next decade, Abram, “In Search of Lost Time,” 23-44; Howe, “An Angle on this Earth,” 3-27; Orton, “The Form and Structure of The Seafarer,” in Old English Literature, 353-81; Liuzzo, “The Tower of Babel,” 1-35; Daily, “Questions of Dwelling,” in New Medieval Literatures 8, 175-214; and Orchard, “Reconstructing,” in Intertexts, 47-70; and in the most recent decade, Beaston, “The Ruin,” 477-89; and Critten, “Via Rome,” 209-31. An
This recent change in scholarly attention given this poem, a symptom perhaps of a larger trend in medieval studies, is unfortunate for several reasons. First of all, this imaginative work, though significantly damaged in manuscript (see following pages),\(^3\) remains one of the most technically innovative examples of Old English poetry, a distinction acknowledged and painstakingly confirmed by scholars since the third decade of the last century.\(^4\)

Thematically, too, this poem continues to remain one of the most enigmatic examples of the elegiac form in Old English, if in fact it is an example of that form at all. It does not, like The Wanderer or The Seafarer, appear to lament the transitory nature of human endeavor or existence. Rather, through an implicit process of comparison and contrast effected by alternation between descriptions of harrowing ruins in an imagined, seemingly unspecified temporal point in the past, and descriptions of what seems to be a vibrant Romano-British legionary fortress-city in its heyday in an imagined, seemingly unspecified prior time,\(^5\) it appears to yearn for restoration of an early and shorter version of this paper was presented at the Second Annual Symposium on Medieval & Renaissance Studies, June 16-18, 2014, at the Center for Medieval & Renaissance Studies, St. Louis University.


4 Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, lxv, call attention to the fact that, though its tone is predominantly elegiac, the poem is distinct from other lyric-elegiac works in the Exeter Book in a number of ways, including internal rimes in lines “5b, 7b, 11b, 31b, 39b, together with the unusual concreteness of vocabulary, and the use of a number of words elsewhere unrecorded in Anglo-Saxon.” In acknowledging the poet’s use of hapax legomena among other things, Lee, *The Guest Hall of Eden*, 150-51, identifies the poet’s method as being something close to that of a twentieth-century “imagist” poet. Renoir, “The Old English Ruin,” in *The Old English Elegies*, 150, takes this insightful assessment of distinct un-usualness one step further by calling attention to the poet’s effective deployment of what amounts to an Old English affective stylistics. In comparing the poem to several famous examples of Old English poetic elegy, he observes on the same page—and it is worth repeating this point in full—that the poem “… contains no philosophical statement and offers no clue whatsoever regarding the status, sex, situation, or state of mind of its speaker. In effect, it has a speaking voice but no speaker, and no actual human action takes place within its time frame or is mentioned having taken place or being about to take place. Such activity—in contrast to action—as we are asked to evoke is purely imaginary, is of a general nature, would have taken place generations before, and claims no connection with the speaking voice or any specific person in the poem. In other words, whereas the physical frame of reference is merely ambiguous and accordingly enables dedicated scholars to hold out for Bath or Chester or some other location, the emotional frame of reference is a total vacuum, which the modern reader must fill from his or her own reading of the text. As a result of this vacuum, the specific quality of the extant text—that is to say, such aspects thereof as produce its effect upon the audience—must perforce become a focal point for the reader intent upon enjoying the poem as well as for the critic attempting to analyze it.”

5 Kennedy, *Old English Elegies*, 19, was one of the first to make this distinction.
even older social, political, and even economic order insuring the peacefulness and prosperity that, in more peaceful, bountiful days, made life worth living for occupying troops under the boreal climate of Britannia, the northwest limit of Rome’s brādan rīces (37b), or ‘of the far-flung kingdom.’ Finally, while deploying a unique poetic strategy that establishes anachronistically its focus by alternating between the opposite acts of looking forward and backward probably during the first and second complete centuries of Roman occupation in Britain, especially including in that temporal focus the latter century’s—that is, the third century’s—last and tumultuous decade, the poem appears, as the only work in all of extant Old English poetry, to take the unusual, daring step of implicitly identifying recuperation and mastery of the creative thinking fundamental to various types of arts of a long-vanished culture to be the most practical, almost sacramental, means of revitalizing private as well as public well-being within contemporaneous early British culture.

To view this most curious specimen of Old English poetry in this way, as an Old English poetic Romano-British arts encomium, might well be judged idiosyncratic. But so much within the poem, as well as so much surrounding it in the Exeter Book, invites just such an approach that, not to consider it in this light would seem an error or, at the very least, a lack of critical due diligence. Publication quite some time ago of Fred C. Robinson’s advice regarding the need always to remember to examine what is immediately before or after any Old English work in manuscript,⁶ a precaution voiced by him and others for at least a decade before, did prompt some in the last century to begin to question critical orthodoxy regarding the poem. Those efforts, accordingly, established the possibility of viewing the work as something of a riddle, an “exercise in ingenuity,” like the poems immediately preceding and following it in manuscript, or even as an example of the Latin “encomium urbis” tradition, a much older literary form, dating from the first century and continuing in popularity down through the twelfth.⁷

While concern for textual and conventional thematic matters in

⁶ “Old English Literature,” in Old English Literature in Context, 11.

⁷ On the riddle quality of this work, see Johnson, “The Ruin as Body-City Riddle,” 397. The riddle as “exercise in ingenuity,” an observation made by Williamson, A Feast of Creatures, 8, is certainly an observation that can be applied to this poem. On this poem as example of the “encomium urbis” tradition, see Lee, “The Ruin: Bath or Babylon,” 443-55.
the work continued to attract the lion’s share of critical attention, this new interest, fortunately, was given renewed impetus and new, distinct focus and direction by Anne L. Klinck, first in the 1980s, through her study of the initial burn hole in the manuscript, and, later, in the 1990s, through her thorough critical edition of the poem.\(^8\) One of the conclusions in her first study—namely, that enough evidence is now retrievable to suggest the first damaged passage emphasizes “not the wreckage of the buildings, as has been assumed, but their remaining impressiveness”—and one of the conclusions in the introduction to her critical edition of the poem—namely, that the movement in the piece, toward its end, is not in the direction of the eschatological but rather the reverse, in the direction of a more vital past, which minimizes the conventional elegiac while emphasizing the triumph of the human imagination—have established, when considered together, a new critical vantage point from which to understand and appreciate what is latent and sophisticated in the work.\(^9\) Not to seize the interpretive opportunity afforded by these two insightful and thorough scholarly efforts, especially in light of the many conclusions about the poem advanced by other studies coming before and after them, would be a mistake. What follows, thus, is an attempt to realize several implications of this new direction in thinking about the work, which cannot but further elucidate and advance understanding of the poem’s uniquely appreciative early British view of several distinct aspects of the Roman occupation of Britain, a perspective hitherto given short shrift by scholars and critics of Old English literature, but certainly inviting further scholarly and critical investigation and consideration.

I

To approach this unique poem from the viewpoint of its celebrating the triumph of the human imagination focused on redemption of society through appreciation and recuperation of the arts, engineering and otherwise, associated with a culture no longer present except in

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\(^8\) "A Damaged Passage," 165-68, and *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition*, 61-63, 70, respectively. Hereafter, reference to the poem appearing in text will be to Klinck’s critical edition of the poem.

\(^9\) "A Damaged Passage," 68, and *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition*, 63, respectively. Also see for celebration of the memory of better times, Brandl, “Venantius Fortunatus,” 84.
ruins requires careful reassessment of what those arts are, as they are explicitly and implicitly presented in the poem’s lines, and how and why, in this particular work, the poet utilizes such things as frequently-deployed conventional and unconventional language, images, and alliteration, as well as innovative rhetorical strategies, such as parataxis, to call attention to the effect and value of those arts. But before turning to these important considerations regarding the poem in general, and to the poet’s technique in particular, it is necessary, first, to review preliminarily some of the actual or implicit problems—the physical, perceptual, and interpretive challenges—with which the poem continues to present contemporary readers and scholars. Most noticeable—and most distressing—among these concerns is the actual physical condition of the codex containing the poem. The mutilation caused to the manuscript at some point in the later Middle Ages, either by water corrosion or by an implement like a hot iron—\(^{10}\)the codex, it has been suggested, might even have been used, at some point, as a cutting board of some sort—\(^{11}\)—has resulted in lacunae from line 12a to line 17a, and again at the poem’s conclusion, from line 42b to line 49b. While attempts have been made to reconstruct the sense of some of the missing lines from the first lacuna, no comparable effort has yet been made in regard to the second. So much of the manuscript has been lost as the result of the second lacuna, in fact, that many may still be tempted to conclude, as Klinck herself once observed, that “the total effect of the poem is lost to us,”\(^{12}\) though the process of reconstruction begun by her offering sound conjecture about what was destroyed by the first burn hole can be pursued further, and taken up again, hopefully with equally convincing success, in regard to the poem’s second area of damage.

Yet another problem having to do with the text, a perceptual one, involves the perpetuation of a general interpretive misunderstanding of the poem’s contents. This misperception has arisen from the continued critical habit of giving the work the title of *The Ruin*.

\(^{10}\) Kennedy, *Old English Elegies*, 5, 18-19, identifies the damage as either that of water corrosion or fire. Also see Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, xv.

\(^{11}\) Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, xiv.

a title appearing in editions and translations of the poem down to
the present day, and one which has encouraged critical assumptions
about the work that may not even be supported by the poem’s extant
contents. Related to and resulting from this problem is perpetuation of
confusion over what actually appears to be in ruins in the poem’s two
sections offering accounts of destruction. One critic, for example, has
claimed the poet acknowledges the wall’s destruction at least three
times, a destructive engineering feat, if from battle and not simply
from aging, that would have taxed even the most fully equipped
and technologically advanced hostile forces of the barbarian, Scots
from the northwest and Picts from the north.\textsuperscript{13} While the jury may
still be out about there being something in the thinking of scholars
and critics of Old English prose and poetry that does not like a wall,
are the accounts of destruction here actually those of the wall? Or
do these passages in the poem offer astounding, imagined visual
images of destruction affecting the buildings enclosed and protected
by the wall, the Romano-British fortress-city’s defensive bulwarks?\textsuperscript{14}

Added to the unfortunate condition of manuscript degradation
and potential editorial misperception is a long history of trying to
construe the poem’s startling, problematic first line. It is not the
line’s first hemistich—\\textit{Wrættlic is þes wealstān}! (1a)—that has
caused puzzlement, but instead the second—\\textit{Wyrde gebrǣcon} (1b).
Ever since the early nineteenth century, this second hemistich has
been rendered in contemporary English or Latin, in either one of

\textsuperscript{13} Keenan, “The Ruin as Babylon,” 115, makes this repeated claim about the wall’s de-
struction. For a sampling of this tendency in thinking regarding the wall, see Doubleday,
“\textit{The Ruin: Structure and Theme,}” 377, who indicates several times the wall is either crum-
bbling or demolished; Gordon, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Poetry}, 84, who describes the walls as “fallen”;
Johnson, “\textit{The Ruin as Body-City Riddle,}” 400-04, who describes everything in ruins,
including walls; Kennedy, \textit{Old English Elegies}, 21, who describes the walls as “shattered”;
Panofsky, “The Ideological Antecedents,” 282, who states the destructive forces of destiny,
as the poem indicates, leave “only wreckage” in their wake; Talentino, “Moral Irony in The
Ruin,” 3, who suggests the crumbling walls “are, in part, the result of a crumbling social
structure”; and Wentersdorf, “Observations,” 175, who concludes the walls are ruined.
An early, solitary voice maintaining the wall is not the site of ruins, however, is that of
acknowledged by Irving, it is necessary to remember that the barbarian knew enough not
to put military assets in jeopardy through a frontal assault on a wall but rather to assail such
monumental architectural structures at their weakest points, like the gate or the bastion.
Hadrian’s Wall, as Collingwood and Myres observed quite some time ago, \textit{Roman Britain},
155, “down to the end of its history . . . never fell before a frontal attack. It was captured
by the enemies of Rome only when its garrison was either withdrawn or else in league with
those same enemies.” Recently, Orton, “The Form and Structure of \textit{The Seafarer,}” in \textit{Old
English Literature}, 357, describes the city in the poem as being rubble, and avoids mention
of the wall’s condition.

\textsuperscript{14} From what the poet presents, the imagined ruins appear to be those of a Romano-British
fortress city like Calleva (Silchester), rather than those of Hadrian’s Wall, though the ruins
could very well be those of a large milecastle located somewhere along the Wall.
two ways. First, it has been construed to mean ‘Fates destroyed [it],’ which treats *Wyrde* as a nominative plural with an implied antecedent object—i.e., the wall-stone construction. It has also been understood to mean ‘destroyed by Fate,’ which treats *gebrǣcon*, the plural preterit, as the past participle *gebrocen*, with *Wyrde* as a singular in the instrumental case, what the poem’s first translator and editor believed to be the case when recasting the half line in Latin simply as “Fāto disruptum.” Neither solution offered thus far construing the line, however, is satisfactory for several reasons. The first is that, barring the possibility of scribal error, one as adept at description and manipulation of his *wordhord* as the poet would not have inadvertently confused a plural preterit with a past participle, particularly when later he includes that very same past participle in the work, and especially when his text is “otherwise consistent in its spelling of strong past participles.” The second reason is that translation of *Wyrde* as a nominative plural does not make sense grammatically since the implied antecedent object appears in manuscript as a nominative, not as an accusative.

And even if scholars were to persist in arguing the poet intentionally committed a mistake in the first line’s second hemistich as part of some innovative, creative poetic strategy, two very obvious things having to do with sense in the poem, things hitherto possibly overlooked by critics, clearly challenge the basis of such an interpretive assumption. The first is that the implied wall permitting the perception of the splendid wall-stone construction, which in turn leads to the first

15 Raffel’s modernization of the line, ‘Fate has smashed these wonderful walls,’ *Poems*, 27, l.1, illustrates this interpretive tendency.

16 Kennedy’s modernization of the line’s second hemistich, ‘wasted by Fate!’ *An Anthology*, 8, l.1b, illustrates this interpretive tendency.


18 Renoir, “The Old English Ruin,” 170, n27.

19 Evidence may exist in the manuscript for scribal confusion between *þæs* and *þes*, as has been suggested by Klink in *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition*, 208, but no evidence exists for there ever having been any confusion between *þæs* and *þisne*, a grammatical distinction that would have been dictated by an antecedent accusative in the line’s first hemistich.
hemistich’s initial exclamation of awe-inspiring wonder, cannot have been destroyed or reduced to a pile of rubble prior to the eighth-century authorial moment of the poem, the currently accepted date of the poem’s composition. Then as now, expression of awe-inspiring wonder in response to a wall-stone construction is more likely to occur than not if that wall-stone construction exists, or at least a substantial part of it. The second thing arguing against Fate or the Weird Sisters having left the wall in shambles is the simple fact that such an outcome contradicts the poem’s most evident emphasis on the monumental wall’s timeless permanence which, as opposed to the impermanence of what it encloses, is directly remarked by the poet two noticeable times, and in two imaginatively different ways—first, at line 9b, in terms of the wall’s massive solidity as it has continued to stand through the ages, ræghār ond rēadfāh (10a), ‘grey with lichen and red-stained,’ while differing reigns have come and gone; and next, at lines 19b-20b, in terms of its construction as the master-builder and workers erect it, marvelously binding or cramping its fitted footing stones together, walanwīrum (20b), ‘by strips of metal,’ in the northwest limit of the ‘far-flung kingdom,’ encompassing the “urbs” or city, the very heart of the Roman conception of the social, political, and economic unit that comprised one of the essential building blocks of imperial unity throughout the empire.

Accordingly, if the poet’s use of Wyrde at the beginning of the first line’s second hemistich is not to be considered a mistake, or a plural nominative, or a singular instrumental, then the grammatical logic of the half line, as well as Wyrde’s final vowel, can only permit translation of it in one final way—as a plural accusative followed

20 Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition*, 15-21, indicates the terminus ad quern for the manuscript to be no later than 950 C.E., and does not dispute the poem’s date of composition offered by Leslie, *Three Old English Elegies*, 34-37, who assigns the early eighth century as the terminus a quo for the poet.

21 The single bath’s wall at line 39b, a smaller version of the fortress-city’s monumental bulwark, functions similarly as principal enclosure or barrier housing and protecting the heated waters, Weal eall befēng (39b), and so insures continuation of the Roman cultural public health tradition of bathing or “lāvātīo.”
by a plural preterit with an implied antecedent plural nominative. Objection to this hitherto overlooked way of translating this second half-line certainly must immediately begin with the last part of this proposed translation since the subjective complement in the line’s first hemistich, wealstān, that hemistich’s subject placed in the subjective complement’s position through a reversal of the half-line’s contents to emphasize the predicate adjective Wrǣtlic, is actually a singular. But since the subject is more likely than not a large portion in the eighth century of a still-standing ‘wallstone construction,’ if not a complete wall, in this instance being remarked quite excitedly, with the same awe and wonder that the vista afforded by Hadrian’s Wall even today elicits in the mind of the observer standing on that monumental structure, looking both to the north and south of it, then it cannot be forgotten that what is a singular here also can be understood as a plural since such a construction is wrought by many stones following a certain design to form a singular totality, a wall-stone construction or, simply, a wall. The wall-stone construction’s uniqueness of being one and many at the same time, a plural singular, like the Roman battle formation of the “testūdo” or the Anglo-Saxon battle formation of the “battle hedge,” a paradoxical notion challenging the reader’s attention in

22 The idea here of one being many, and many being one, by no means a notion foreign to the Anglo-Saxon mind, can trace its origin at least partly to the Macedonian military formation of the line or the phalanx, a battle formation associated initially with Alexander the Great. Probably aware of this effective Greek military formation, Caesar, in The Conquest of Gaul, 60-61, identifies the Belgea as warriors who employ a modification of this formation, what later will be called the “testūdo,” when he observes that they form a defense by locking “their shields over their heads.” He also refers to this defensive unity made out of multiplicity, this e pluribus unum, as a “shield-wall” that the Romans are forced to tear down by hand, as Fowler observes in Julius Caesar and the Foundation, 158. Tacitus introduces the idea of the tortoise, in the broadest sense of the word—that is, the “testūdo,” when remarking the use of the “shield-wall,” the “dense array of the ‘testūdo,’” or a “dense array of shields,” in the Annals and History, in Church and Brodribb, The Complete Works of Tacitus, 554-55, and 608, respectively. Virgil uses the same term, the formation from many of the singular unity described as the “tortoise shell,” in the Aeneid, Book IX, lines 505 and 514, in Rhoades, The Poems of Virgil, in Great Books, 13: 292-93. And not to be forgotten is the notable and famous visual representation of the “testūdo” in part of the bas relief on Trajan’s Column remarked by Fowler, Julius Caesar and the Foundation, 159. So when the author of The Battle of Maldon writes in Whitelock, Sweet’s Anglo-Saxon Reader, 119—

Þǣr ongēan gramum    gearowe stōdon
the same way as do the Old English riddles appearing before and after the poem in the Exeter Book by “calling forth our powers of recognition and realization,” thus can connect the two halves of the poem’s first line, logically, by offering the second hemistich an implied antecedent plural of what the wall-stone construction consists—i.e., the massive stones—which results thus in a new, surprising, but logical translation of the complete first line as follows:

‘Wondrous is this wall-stone construction! [Those stones] crushed the Fates.’

Understanding this paradox of the wall-stone construction’s unique quality of being a singular and plural at the same time has the implicit effect of binding the two half-lines together—it offers, that is, a metaphoric and metamorphic “mortar” by means of an innovative, implied medial enjambment, joining and coursing the words or verbal “cut stones,” as it were, of the line’s two hemistiches—though of course such a treatment of Wyrde, the word completing the line’s internal alliteration, as a plural accusative, immediately raises two other critical objections. Crushing the relentless, implacable Fates or Weird Sisters, the Greco-Roman personification

*Byrhtnōð mid beornum. Hê mid bordum hêt*

*wyrcean þone wihtagen, and þat werod healdan*

*fæste wið fêondum* (ll. 100-103)—

the introduction of the idea of ‘making the war-hedge for battle,’ as Charles W. Kennedy translates “*wyrcean þone wihtagen*” in Robertson, *The Literature of Medieval England*, 160, is not some sort of novel imaginative creation, though the Anglo-Saxon botanical imagery used to describe this unity formed by a multiplicity of shields in this instance differs from the reptilian imagery usually employed by the Roman authors.


24 This imaginative description of how elements of the first line’s internal structure cohere has been offered to me by contemporary American poet Roy M. Scheele.
of human destiny, is, philosophically, an act considered impossible. Even Ovid’s Jupiter himself, for example, makes it very clear he has no power over Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, the necessity above and behind gods and men, when in response to the story of Dryope he quiets the other gods by exclaiming:

What recklessness is this? What reverence
Is left me? Do you think yourselves so mighty,
So powerful, that the Fates are less? I tell you
The Fates returned his years to Iolaus,
The Fates made warriors of Callirhoe’s children,
The Fates rule you, so you had better like it;
They rule me too; if I had power to change them,
Years would not now be bending down my son,
My Aeacus; Minos and Rhadamanthus
Would still be in their prime, my own son, Minos,
Who rules but feebly now, since men despise him
For the sad weight of age.

Secondly, turning Wyrde into the direct object of the first line’s second hemistich appears to confuse continuity of sense between the first line’s second half and the first half of the second line. But this exclamatory exaggeration implicit in overcoming the dominance of an absolute principle that even the king of the Olympians, the ruler of the universe, has no power to challenge and subdue is just the hyperbolic and even nearly riddle effect, it would appear, the poet hopes to achieve, at the beginning of the poem, to emphasize, by means of both grammatical and syntactical paradox, the wondrous solidity and permanence of the wall’s construction, and, by implication, the equally wondrous thinking that conceived

25 Gayley, The Classic Myths, 38. Malone, “The Old English Period,” in A Literary History, 89, indicates the poet’s Wyrde answers to the idea of Fate of classical antiquity, and may even be conforming “to some classical literary model.” Timmer, “Wyrd in Anglo-Saxon Prose and Poetry,” iii: 213, makes the point that wyrd, as it is used in Old English, stands for the Christian concept. Refining this point, he adds that such words in poetry “are used which originally belonged to heathen terminology and which through representing ideas common to both the old and the new faith have become adapted to Christian terminology.” This observation may be true for much of Anglo-Saxon poetry, but as the remainder of this essay will attempt to demonstrate, it does not appear to be true in the case of this particular poem, the exceptional quality of which challenges the orthodox absoluteness of the rule repeated by Timmer and perhaps still believed by many that “no genuinely heathen poetry in Anglo-Saxon has come down to us.”

26 Ovid, Metamorphoses, 221, ll. 429-40.
of, designed, and created that structure in the first place. The eternal solidity and permanence of the bulwark, the arresting and astounding expression of the architectural and engineering genius behind Roman imperial unity insuring and thus affording peace and prosperity for the imported southern European culture in the far-flung northern latitudes of Britannia, as opposed to the temporal modifications of the wall or the burgstede (2a), the ‘fortified places’ or ‘bastions,’ built on or into the wall, that in the first hemistich of line 2 are said to have ‘broken apart,’ burston (2a), is therefore fully distinguished most effectively and startlingly by the poet in the two parts of the poem’s first line to free the reader or auditor by means of wonder from the poem’s initial actual moment in time and space, as it were, and to appreciate fully the profound difference between that moment and an imagined present moment in the past, centuries before, when the reality of the poem’s actual initial moment of composition could not even have been anticipated by the most creative imagination and forward-looking Romano-British mind.

II

Translating the poem’s initial line in this new way—as an exclamation in response to the eternal paradoxical quality of Romano-British monumental architecture’s permanence and singular splendor—precludes the possibility in the poem of an introductory conventional Old English elegiac-lyric expression of mourning in response to

27 The hyperbolic effect achieved by the poem’s first line also implicitly emphasizes the feature of the wall-stone construction’s eternal quality. In discussing the Weird Sisters in his The Great Mother, 228, Neumann makes the point that the archetype represents the “three temporal stages of all growth (beginning-middle-end, birth-life-death, past-present-future).” The destruction at the beginning of the poem of this seemingly unassailable absolute embodied by Fate eliminates the notion of allotted time and so situates the wall-stone construction beyond the positive time of created reality, a condition not without precedent in Western thinking. The idea associated with Hermes Trismegistus, appearing in the first and chief fragment of the Hermetic Corpus, Poimandres, and dating from as early as the third century C.E., that, as observes Thorndike, A History of Magic, 1: 290-91, “the chosen few who possess gnosis or are capable of receiving nous can escape the decrees of fate as administered by the stars and ultimately return to the spiritual world, passing through ‘choruses of demons’ and ‘courses of stars’ and reaching the Ogdoad or eighth heaven above and beyond the spheres of the seven planets,” may have been known by the poet in the eighth century, enabling the positing of an intellectual and practical challenge to the absolute idea fundamental to the medieval conception of inexorable fate.
the transitory condition of creation and the inevitable destruction of all human endeavor.\textsuperscript{28} This change in tone, emphasis, and focus alone, should give pause to anyone ready to continue the editorial identification of the poem as \textit{The Ruin}. More importantly, however, it invites an alternative way of considering how the image sequences or series of tableaux\textsuperscript{29} of construction and destruction function in the forty-nine complete and fragmentary lines of the work. To determine how this is so, attention should first be turned to reassessing the purpose of the two image sequences or tableaux of destruction.

Contrary to some criticism of the poem, these tableaux have to do, not with the ruined state of a fortress-city’s wall, but rather with the ruined state of its dwellings and other buildings enclosed by the wall. In the first destruction account (2a-9a), for example, ‘fortified places’ are said to have ‘burst’ or ‘broken apart,’ \textit{burgstede burston} (2a). These places are not the walls but rather the ‘bastions’ that have collapsed, usually the result of having been undermined during battle. In addition, the rest of the description (2b-6a) includes the fate of towers and roofs, and the archway gate itself. After that follows description of interment of those who designed, built, and maintained the fortress-city and its monumental defensive wall (6b-9a). In the second destruction account (25a-32a), the reverse occurs. First is described the slaughter of the garrison (25a-29a), then attention turns to the buildings (29b-32a). Again, what are in shambles are the dwellings and other structures within the enclosure. The wood-beam building construction, including the distinct red arches finished with tiles (a Roman, not a Germanic, architectural feature), is remarked and said to be part of a scene of ‘dwellings’ that grows ‘dismal,’ a scene of collapse, of everything within the enclosure in a heap and broken, now decaying:

\begin{verbatim}
Forþon þās hofu drēorgiað
ond þes tēaforgēapa  tigelum scēadeð,
hoostēames rōf         (29b-31a)
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{28} Lee, “\textit{The Ruin},” 453, emphasizes this point.

\textsuperscript{29} Renoir, “The Old English \textit{Ruin},” 149.
(‘Therefore, these dwellings grow dismal,
and these red-arched [structures] tiles part from,
support for inner framework of roof’).

In addition, the temporal context of destruction in both image sequences is not the same kind of temporal context of destruction imaged by the “shattered galleries, 'mid roofless halls,” “relics of kings!” that Wordsworth’s “Stranger” wanders through “with timid footsteps.” Wordsworth’s “Stranger’s” hesitant footsteps in the 1827 published sonnet, “Composed among the Ruins of a Castle in North Wales,” are more or less contemporaneous with Wordsworth himself.\textsuperscript{30} The destruction in the Old English poem, on the other hand, is not experienced in the early eighth century, the time of the poem’s composition, but rather in an imagined past, at a moment in time hundreds of years even before the Saxon invasion of Britain, and at a moment at least many months, if not a year or even two, after the cataclysmic attack that had led to the Romano-British fortress-city’s having been overrun and its buildings left in shambles.

The poet’s focusing of attention anachronistically on the relationship between these two moments in time by means of the poem’s “time shifts,”\textsuperscript{31} hundreds of years prior to the eighth century, is engaged in for two reasons. The first is to reconstruct imaginatively a point in time in Romano-British history that invites the eyewitness act of looking forward by considering the visual evidence of harrowing destruction that has occurred sometime before, in the recent, not too distant past. What is being anticipated through this temporal reconstruction’s reorientation of perspective is the imminent restoration of the fortress-city, the return of this eorcanstān (36b), this ‘precious stone,’ this beorhtan burg (37a), this ‘bright fortress-city,’ to its former splendor. How such an expectation is justified and evoked by the poet is evidenced three ways in these two destruction sequences or tableaux. The first is through the absoluteness of the destruction evidenced within the installation itself. Such carnage would necessitate the replacement of the garrison, perhaps through

\textsuperscript{30} Wordsworth, \textit{The Poetical Works}, 272.

\textsuperscript{31} Calder, “Perspective and Movement,” 443. For a different, more recent view regarding the function of the poem’s dual temporal perspective and the way in which it parallels the same in Alfredian prose works, see Critten, “Via Rome,” 211.
reassignment of several cohorts of a legion to the empire’s northwest frontier. What is recounted throughout the second image sequence or tableau of destruction, the shorter and chronologically earlier of the two scenes of ruin, beginning at line 25a and ending at line 29a, is the very moment when the fortress-city is initially attacked, the moment of the cataclysmic confrontation and disaster. Auxiliaries, as well as the fortress-city’s legionaries—secgrōfra wera (26b), ‘... brave [men] with swords’ (26b)—the poet indicates, suddenly find themselves engaged with the enemy in a titanic struggle consisting of numerous battles at different locations when the fortress-city, as well as probably a large portion of the frontier and province, is completely overrun by the barbarian, the invading forces from north of Hadrian’s Wall. The scale of this staggering military clash is suggested here in two ways. The first, the spatial, consists of the adverbial marker used to modify where it is those slain in battle have fallen—wīde (25a), ‘far and wide.’ The second, the temporal, consists of a description of the carnage’s short- and long-term horrifying consequence—wōldagas (25b), ‘the days of pestilence’ that have no doubt resulted from and followed annihilation of the fortress-city’s former garrison.32 The line immediately following this disturbing description may seem an exaggeration—

\[
\text{Swylte eall fornōm secgrōfra wera (26a-26b)}
\]

(Death all of [them] took away [all] of the brave [men] with the sword).

But it may also in fact be a hauntingly accurate account of the slaughter’s terrible extent. The destruction, at the hands of the enemy, is complete; no one is left to bury the dead.

This annihilation of the fortress-city’s garrison, as well as the presumed massacre of all left within the fortress-city, provides the logic for presenting this scene of destruction’s brief second part, the destruction of things made. As with the fortress-city’s inhabitants

32 Frank, A History of Rome, 544, indicates, as do others, that plague did break out in the empire’s eastern provinces, decimating extremely large portions of the various populations, toward the end of Valerian’s rule (253-258 C.E.) in the joint-rule with his son, Gallienus (253-268 C.E.). If it is the case that the author of Codex Exoniensis, fols. 123b-124b, has imaginatively set the events of his poetic meditation at this temporal moment in the final decades of the third century, as this essay will later attempt to demonstrate, it is conceivable the reference to the ‘days of pestilence’ may also be acknowledgment of the plague’s final arrival in this northwest frontier of the empire, as we know it did, to compound the problem of the fortress-city’s destruction.
following the slaughter, so with what was encompassed by the enclosure of the formidable wall. The fortress-city, the poet reveals, again through a simple preterit, is left in ruins—

*Brosnade burgsteall* (28a), ‘the city site crumbled.’ This destruction is made even more startling by the additional fact that no one is left living who might engage in the work of restoration—

*bētend crungon* (28b), ‘repairers died in battle.’ Accordingly, the most vulnerable part of the fortress-city’s wall fortification—

*wīgsteal* (27a), ‘the bastion’—is described as a ‘waste place’ or a ‘deserted site’—

*wēstenstaþolas* (27b). The Romano-British laborers and engineers who were called upon to rebuild what nature or the barbarian had destroyed were also the professional soldiers, the legionaries, who manned the fortress-city’s fortifications and met the enemy on the field of battle. It is for this reason the repairers whom the poet mentions died in battle are also described as the ‘troops’ who have ‘fallen to the ground’—

*hergas to hrūsan* (29a). This massacre complete, the immediate fate of the fortress-city is sealed, and part of the empire’s northwest defensive line is thus left compromised and vulnerable to further attack and pillage.

The second way expectation of restoration is made to seem justifiable is suggested by the poet through evocation of a period of enough time having passed since the initial destruction to warrant belief in the imminent arrival of hoped-for, and perhaps even expected, replacements to re-garrison the outpost as well as other sites in the province and along the frontier. Evocation of this period of time having passed is first established by simple temporal distinction between an anachronistic “then,” the moment of initial imagined destruction and slaughter, and an anachronistic “now,” the moment of initial imagined perception in the later days of that destruction’s aftermath. This imagined perception of the fortress-city’s material destruction is articulated by the poet in the present tense, beginning with the memorable half-line, *

*brosnād enta geweorc* (2b), ‘work of giants crumbles,’ which introduces in part an expression like that present in MS Cotton Tiberius B. i’s Maxims II to emphasize the ingenuity of the work of giants, the Romans, and to associate

33 Scullard, *Roman Britain*, 79.
that work with heavy-stone construction.\textsuperscript{34} While nearly the rest of this scene is conveyed by means of the same verb tense, either actually or implicitly, to emphasize the immediacy of its perception, the destruction recounted in it is distinguished from the event that precipitated the harrowing destruction, the cause, which literally and immediately precedes it in the poem and is set in the preterit—\textit{burgstede burston} (2a), ‘fortified places broke apart,’ an expression also found elsewhere in Early English poetry and used to evoke the association between inevitable destruction and the transitory quality of all human endeavor.\textsuperscript{35} The difference in time between the cause-event and the condition-effect, however, is not introduced here to evoke the reason for elegiac mourning, but rather, surprisingly, to explain the degree of dilapidation perceived in the anachronistic moment of “now,” in which the latter is understood to have occurred.

Suggestion of enough time having passed to warrant restoration is further established imaginatively by the poet through evocation of the duration of a measurable period of time having passed. One way in which this temporal evocation is effected results by expression of the physics of dilapidation in the first image sequence or tableau. The poet obviously presents this condition without knowledge of the law of gravity, but what is described is gravity’s effect over time. The first examples mentioned to reveal this consequence have to do with the damaged roofs of the fortress-city’s buildings that, through neglect, have now begun to collapse under their own weight—\textit{hrōfas sind gehorene} (3a), ‘roofs are caved in.’ Other examples mentioned to illustrate the same natural law’s effect over a period of time are the most noticeable features of the fortress-city seen from afar, the towers that are leaning and beginning to fall down—\textit{hrēorge torras} (3b), ‘towers collapsing.’ Next, to continue this implicit evocation of time having passed, attention is directed to the principal natural process associated with dilapidation—that

\textsuperscript{34} Dobbie, \textit{The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems}, in \textit{The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records}, Vol. 6, 55.

\textsuperscript{35} Cf. \textit{Wanderer}, lines 73a-77a.
is, rot and decay. Damaged roofs once again occupy the focus of
the imagined visual field, though this time, quite inventively, in the
form of the hapax legomenon *scürbeorge* (5a), ‘storm-protentions.’
These structures, the poet indicates, have been partially destroyed by
a number of forces. Most noticeable about them is that the roofs are
said to be ‘gashed’—*scearde* (5a). What emphasizes the temporal
impression of duration here, in regard to the roofs, is the description
of how some have fallen ‘from age eaten away,’ *ældo undereotone*
(6a). Inclusion of the dative through the word *ældo* suggests a
period of many months, if not a year or two. Damage from water or
infestation, when maintenance is no longer present, never happens
overnight.36

Suggestion of duration is also made in this image sequence by
the implied condition of spare time or leisure—not the leisure or
“ōtĭum” enjoyed by the Romano-British garrison legionaries at the
baths, the hydro-mechanical sites mentioned later in the poem, but
rather from the way in which things can be done in or around the
deserted fortress-city, without any sense of urgency, now that enough
time has passed since the fatal unleashing of the furious assault
upon the installation’s inhabitants, fortifications, and buildings.

36 The second way the spatial here helps further situate perception at a time later than the
initial cataclysmic destruction is through the poet’s utterance of *hrim on lime* (4b), ‘hoar-
frost upon mortar,’ another of the poem’s haunting images. The hoar-frost in this instance
must certainly be construed as the natural phenomenon associated with the colder weather
of the winter season in a boreal climate. The mortar it has settled on, part of the frontier-
system structure’s masonry that has fallen into disrepair through lack of maintenance for
some measurable period of time, is an early sign of nature’s reclamation of things made,
the beginning of the natural process of dissolution, demonstrable evidence of the working
of that something there is that does not love a wall. But the figurative implication here of
the word *lime*—that is, the mortar or masonry associated with the Roman conception and
construction of the “limes” or ‘boundary-path’ or ‘boundary-line,’ the expression of the
‘far-flung kingdom’s’ extent and the historical reality from which our whole conception of
“limit” may in part derive—cannot be ignored. That barrier’s condition of being hoar-frost
encrusted conveys the idea of desolation, but the history of such condition at this line of de-
marcation between southern European culture and civilization’s most northward advance
and northern European culture and civilization’s capillary response to such expression of
force also implies the potential for imminent renewal. The restorations punctuating the
history of that line of demarcation, including at least two in number by the implied anach-
ronistic time in the poem of cataclysmic destruction, would suggest such a possibility.
Thus, the image of collapse suggested by the frost, which focuses attention on the mortar
or masonry that is disintegrating, may actually also be a harbinger of imminent recovery as
much as it is a natural sign of decay.
This extra time available, the result of enough time having passed since the initial cataclysmic confrontation, is acknowledged, in this intervening period of relative peace and tranquility, to have permitted exploitation of what is to be found among the ruins of the fortress-city. One example of this relation between time and exploitation arises when it is indicated in the poem, through use of the past participle, that ‘storm-protections’ may have been ‘cut down’—scorenē (5b). Such structures would certainly have provided ready abundance of fuel or building material in the form of timber. Another like example offered here is that of the archway gate. This structure, when unhinged and broken up, could be used for the same purposes as the roof timbers. What is more, since the barbarian, the invader from the north, never occupied the Romano-British fortress-cities he overran, and since the gate represented military as well as economic control of the frontier by a formidable foreign presence the barbarian had grown used to hating, hringeat berofen (4a), ‘archway gate taken away,’ also may be a means of acknowledging the barbarian’s having wreaked havoc, in cold fury, without any pressing concerns to distract him, the very act of what eventually would come to be known as “vandalism.” Such kinds of unhurried instances of wanton destruction occurring at the beginning of the third century, for example, are amply documented archeologically at Hadrian’s Wall.37

One final way duration is implied here is through a kind of rhetorical evocation of dilapidation by means of an artfully deployed “asynthetic parataxis” in this part of the poem consisting of a sequence of participial phrases, a memorable noun phrase, a prepositional phrase, and at least one passive verb construction:

hrōfas sind gehrorene hrēorge torras;
hringeat berofen, hrīm on līme;
scearde scūrbeorge, scorene, gedrorene,
aeldo undereotone (3a-6a)

(‘roofs are caved in towers collapsing,
archway-gate taken away, hoar-frost upon mortar;
storm-protections gashed, cut down, fallen,
from age eaten away’).38

37 Collingwood and Myres, Roman Britain, 156.

38 Leslie, Three Old English Elegies, 70, was first to note and identify this tendency in the structure of the verse.
The absence of the adhesive quality always effected by a conjunction in series of phrases and at least one independent clause constituting an extended period, like the passage here, creates the impression of a building’s wall-stone construction starting to come apart, the words as “stones,” as it were, now only loosely aligned, the result of many months, if not a year or two, of neglect, weathering, and the inevitable “powdering,” without maintenance, of the conjunctive mortar that once bound them together.

The final way expectation of restoration appears to be justified is evoked by the historicity of a number of elements actually included or implied in the destruction sequences or tableaux. The implicit among these appear to have the function of anchoring the work’s anachronistic moment of “now” in a time when the periodicity of restoration had become, more than not, a reality in the memories of those stationed in the empire’s northwest frontier. It is not difficult to understand how such an expectation might have become something easily confused with fact in the thinking of those individuals, given the general historical context in which the poem’s anachronism appears to be set.  

During the nearly four-hundred-year-long occupation of Britain, Rome was called upon to restore order and control in this part of the empire four times before the empire’s administrative and economic collapse eventually led to withdrawal from the island—the first, a little more than a decade following completion of Hadrian’s Wall; the next, at the very beginning of the third century; the next, at the very end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth; and the last, approximately three quarters of the way through the fourth century. Reinforcements were moved from other imperial provinces

39 Doubleday, “Ruin 8b-9a,” 124, suggests, like Leslie, Three Old English Elegies, 28, an element of Christian teleology is introduced here. This terminus ad quem of sorts associated with the impression of duration evoked at this point in the poem by introducing an implied future perfect tense (a kind of paulo-post-futurum), through another, brief periphrastic construction, appears to incorporate the early medieval Christian tendency of defining the Apocalypse as completion of a hundred generations. Writing in the early eighth century, at least a century after the beginning of Britain’s conversion to Christianity, the poet could easily have been aware of such a notion. But equally possible in this implied future perfect’s introduction, through reference to the master-builders’ burial sites, is the suggestion of pagan cultural continuity, the continuity of Romanity in the British province extending so far into the future as possibly to reach, not the Christian Apocalypse, but simply creation’s end.

40 The first of these major restorations occurred approximately twenty years after the Wall’s initial construction under direction of A. Platorius Nepos (ca.127 C.E.), shortly
during each of these restorations to re-garrison forts and fortress-cities throughout the island, though for obvious reasons attention was always focused primarily on Hadrian’s Wall, the principal, massive frontier-structure or “limes” in the north, “with its core of rough stone and mortar—essentially a concrete structure—faced on either side with ashlar, [containing] over two million cubic yards of material.” 41

In addition to what must have been perceived as an inevitability in the northwest imperial province—that is, the frontier system’s once and future restoration—the first of specific features in the poem’s destruction sequences having historical quality about them arises in the reference to the burial of the waldenwyrhtan (7a), the ‘master-builders’ or the ‘king’s builders,” 42 whose deaths, logically, had to have preceded the catastrophic onslaught that led to the fortress-

after Antoninus Pius succeeded Hadrian. The work begun at this time (ca.140–42 C.E.) was conducted under the direction of Q. Lollius Urbicus, the new governor of Britannia, who, in reopening Agricola’s road over the Cheveot Hills, rejuvenated the Hadrianic frontier-system and even established the second frontier barrier or “outer ‘limes,’” an earthen one, to the north at the Forth-Clyde isthmus known as the Vallum Antonini. The next major restoration, a little more than half a century later, followed Clodius Albinus’s disastrous removal of many of the garrisons from Britannia to fight in Gaul in his unsuccessful bid for the empire’s throne. The resulting flood of destruction at this time along the Wall and in the north, from York to Chester, prompted the victor, Septimius Severus, as one of his first acts as emperor, to send a new governor to Britannia, Virius Lupus, whose first order of business was to reconstruct all that had been destroyed, including the walls of York (ca.192-208 C.E.). A second order of business, carried out by Severus himself, was to re-institute in part the previous political program of Pius by ravaging the lands to the north to subdue the barbarian, in much the same way Lollius had done before, and in much the same way Agricola had done before him. After an unbroken peace lasting for nearly a century following these campaigns and the death of Severus at York in 211, the third major restoration of Britannia was undertaken by Constantius Chlorus, one of the two Caesars appointed in 293 C.E. by Diocletian, the one given the command of Transalpine Gaul. Like Severus before him, Constantius, known as “Redditor Lucis Aeternae,” immediately put himself to the task of restoring to Britannia the light of Roman culture and civilization, which included reconstruction of parts of the Wall and public buildings, re-fortification of the Saxon Shore as well as fortification of parts of the west coast, rebuilding of the fortress of York with its multangular tower, which stands even today, and perhaps even the re-fortification and adding of bastions to the walls of London (ca. 296-306 C.E.). Following the collapse of Diocletian’s tetrarchy, which left Constantine master of the empire, and a series of emperors following him, the final restoration of the Wall was undertaken near the end of the fourth century under the direction of Count Theodosius (ca. 368 C.E.), the distinguished soldier Valentinian I sent out to Britannia, whose reorganization of the four provinces now comprising the diocese of Britannia–Britannia Prima, Britannia Secunda, Maximus Cæsariensis, and Flavia Cæsariensis—included re-fortifying the Wall and rebuilding many of its smashed buildings, as well as inauguration of a coastguard system to support the defensive system of the Saxon Shore, which eventually permitted establishment of a fifth British province henceforth known as Valenti, with its own governor of consular rank.

41 Collingwood and Myres, Roman Britain, 153.

42 Robinson, “Notes and Emendations,” 363, suggests the builder’s association with royalty conveys the idea of the “very best.”
city’s being overrun. These individuals, who may have lived to old age, could not have received burial, according to custom, if there had been, at the time of their decease, no one living within the fortress-city to bury them in the Roman grave yards usually located well beyond the city’s defensive walls. While the remains of these dead, as the poet indicates, are held by the *Eorðgrāp* (6a), the ‘earth-clutches,’ what is also indicated is that they have been this way, in their graves, for a considerable period of time since they are *forweorene* (7b), since they are said to be ‘decayed.’

Acknowledging this condition of interment provides an approximate terminus a quo for the construction of the wall and the fortress-city it protects, the moment in time when the master-builders and work details first began building this *beorhtan burg* (37a), this ‘bright fortress-city.’ Buried bodies in a state of decay indicates the practice of inhumation rather than cremation, a burial practice in Romano-Britain that became more and more common following the end of the secondcentury.\(^{43}\)

Such a distinction may not lead to identification of the actual Roman fortress-city at the heart of the poem, a subject encouraging debate about the work for over a century,\(^{44}\) but it does.

\(^{43}\) Cunliffe, *Roman Bath discovered*, 89, makes this point about the area surrounding Bath, an example illustrative of practice identified elsewhere.

\(^{44}\) Details in this “oldest example of formal description in English literature,” as Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, lxiv, initially describe the poem, have led to the identification of several forts or fortress-cities as the actual site of the poem. Most popular among these identifications has been the city of Bath, the Roman Aquae Sulis. In the nineteenth century two antiquarians arrived at this conclusion independent of each other’s work. The first was Earle, “An Ancient Saxon Poem,” 259-70, “The Ruined City,” 29, and *Anglo-Saxon Literature*, in which he states, in reference to the poem: “This is no vague poetic composition . . . [it] . . . suits the old Brito-Roman ruins of Akeman (Bath) after 577; and it suits no other place that I can think of in the habitable world,” quoted in Kennedy, *Old English Elegies*, 20. The second was Leo, *Carmen*, 5. Since then many have lent their support to this identification, especially after the early 1960s, when archaeological evidence gradually became available about that ancient city and its principal attractions, the baths as well as the Temple of Sulis Minerva. Among these are Baker, “*Weal* in the Old English *Ruin*,” 328, whose argument assumes Bath as the location; Calder, “Perspective and Movement,” 442, who acknowledges Bath by quoting Wrenn and refuting Keenan; Cunliffe, *Roman Bath discovered*, 94, who quotes Kershaw to substantiate his claim for Bath; Hotchner, *Wessex and Old English Poetry*, who summarizes all previous attempts at making this identification; Kershaw, *Anglo-Saxon and Norse Poems*, 52, who indicates no evidence exists of other cities with baths like those of Bath, which resemble the description in the poem; Leslie, *Three Old English Elegies*, 23-27, whose claim for Bath, the most convincing of all, includes the issues of water pressure, the number of baths, and the circular pool; Mackie, “Notes on Old English Poetry,” 92, who concludes the location must be Bath; Sieper, *Die altenglische Elegie*, 233, who identifies a wall in the poem as belonging to the reservoir at Bath; Wentersdorf, “Observations on *The Ruin*,” 171-80, who elaborates on Leslie’s argument; and Wrenn, *A Study of Old English Literature*, 140, who states *The Ruin* is the “first topographical poem in English” and is “an elegiac meditation on the ruins of an actual and once Roman city, which has been convincingly identified as Bath.”

Arguments against Bath’s being the site of the poem, far fewer in number than those identifying Bath as the site, include Haverfield, “Romano-British Somerset,” in Page, *The Victoria History*, I: 224, who points out that Bath was never more than a “lightly fortified rest center for Roman Britain,” and that the hot springs were nearly inactive by the eighth century; Herben, “The Ruin Again,” 73, who observes the poem’s gushing waters are not geo-thermal, and that there is a circular bath at Mumrills; Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter
suggest that what has at least been imaginatively beheld and is, ultimately, source of the poet’s initial expression of wonder, even as late as the eighth century, represents an architectural achievement dating probably at its earliest from a time at the beginning of the third century, the period of the frontier-system restoration programs initiated by Severus, and later continued by Caracalla—a time that was witness, as historians have frequently reminded us, to widespread stone-wall and stone-building construction projects in Romano-Britain.

Another feature of the poem having historical quality about it, one related to the chronological implications of the change between the practice of inhumation and the practice of cremation in Britannia, has to do with the destruction wrought by the barbarian. As the poet gives an account anachronistically of the initial imagined onslaught, the picture that results is one of carnage and widespread devastation. Such annihilation and near apocalyptic destruction may call to mind events happening in the third century’s last decade in Britannia following the attacks of the northern tribes on the entire frontier system. No events like these had occurred prior to this time in the third century. Despite the anarchy that had broken out throughout the empire following Caracalla’s murder in 217 C.E., an anarchy that irretrievably destabilized the eastern imperial provinces and continued to worsen under the eighteen or more emperors who took the throne afterward before the accession of Diocletian, the four soon-to-be newly-organized provinces of Britannia continued to enjoy an unbroken peace for most of the century, the result of the reforms instituted by Severus prior to and during that century’s first decade.

*Book, lxiv-lxv,* who indicate Bath was not in ruins at the time of the poem’s composition; and Malone, “The Old English Period,” 88, who doubts that the poem’s author “had in mind one site only.” Other locations advanced as the actual site of the poem include Deva (Chester), and any one of several legionary fortress settlements, such as Corstopitum (Corbridge), Vercovicium (Housesteads), and Vindolanda (Chesterholm), along Hadrian’s Wall. A figurative site as the location includes the allegorical concept of Babylon advanced by Keenan, “*The Ruin* as Babylon,” 109-17. The argument for Chester was advanced by Dunleavy, “A ‘De Excidio’ Tradition,” 115-18. The argument for the Wall was advanced by Herben, “*The Ruin*,” 37-39, and “*The Ruin Again,” 72-74. Those favoring no exact location at all, but rather a composite, imagined site, in the spirit of Kemp Malone’s observation, include Greenfield, *A Critical History*, 214, Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, lxv, Lee, *The Guest-Hall of Eden*, 443-44, and Renoir, “The Old English *Ruin*,” 149. The present study favors this perspective.

45 See Birley, *Septimius Severus*, 244-68, especially 259.
However, events in Britannia leading up to the eventual confrontation between Constantius and Allectus approaching the end of the third century—namely, rebel Gallo-Roman Carausius’s establishment of a short-lived, independent British empire in 286 or 287 C.E., his subsequent murder in 293 C.E. by Allectus, his own finance minister, and Allectus’s usurpation of the throne and almost immediate removal of troops from nearly all the Roman fort and fortress-city garrisons, like Albinus’s disastrous strategy a century before, to mount a defense in the south against the inevitable challenge from Rome, this time spearheaded by Constantius—left the occupied territories in Britannia vulnerable to attack, an opportunity the barbarian wasted little time in seizing, leaving most of the defensive system to the north in shambles for a number of years before the usurper could be hunted down and defeated, and before a new program of restoration, the third, could be instituted at the end of the decade and the beginning of a new century, both at the Wall and throughout Britannia’s newly organized provinces. The destruction wrought at this time throughout the land cannot have been much different than that imagined by the poet in the Old English poem. Nor, too, could the ensuing disintegration and dilapidation of buildings during the time following the initial onslaught have been unlike what is described in the poem.  

46 Reference to the ‘bastion,’ at this point in the poem, is important since it also is a circumstance setting the work in time following Severan restoration programs, which instituted the building of this kind of defensive structure. What is more, there is no lingering presence of the marauder in the description except for the implicit isolated instances of vandalism, and no indication or anticipation of a mobile army’s approach, a reality that does not appear in Britannia before 360 C.E., as Collingwood and Myer observe in Roman Britain, 284-88. The terminus ad quem of the anachronistic moment of “now” in the imagined past, thus, has to be some time long before the last half of the fourth century, at least half a century before the arrival of Count Theodosius and the beginning of the fourth restoration (ca. 368 C.E.), when the mobile army first begins to make its appearance in the diocese’s newly established provinces. This fact, combined with the terminus a quo of the anachronistic moment of “then” in the poem’s imagined past as having to be some time after the first decade of the third century, given the archeological evidence of changed burial practice as well as the fact of continued peace in the province for most of the century, appears to identify with some degree of certainty the imagined period of the past in the poem—the period of time between the anachronistic “then” and “now”—as occurring more than likely leading up to and during the tumultuous years of the third century’s last decade when order was finally restored by Constantius Chlorus. The evidence in the poem suggesting this timeframe of Romano-British history as focus of attention supports Critten’s observation that the poem
The second reason Codex Exoniensis, fols. 123b-124b, focuses attention anachronistically on the relationship between the two moments in time prior to the eighth century is to reconstruct imaginatively a temporal point in Romano-British history that invites the act of looking backward by considering visual evidence of construction through the objects of the wall, the wall-stones, and other structures that the wall encloses. These two sequences or tableaux of construction in the poem, the first following from line 9b to line 24b and the second following from line 32b to line 49b, call attention primarily to the condition and permanence, as well as cultural purpose as defensive enclosure, of the fortress-city’s wall. Contemplation of the condition and permanence of these things, not for the purpose of being comforted by nostalgia, is decidedly limited by the first burn-hole in the manuscript affecting lines in the poem beginning at 12a and ending at 17b. But enough of this section devoted to the condition of construction, both appearing before and after the lacuna, as well as enough retrievable fragmentary material on the periphery of the lacuna contributing to the same descriptive end—material that has been carefully documented and assessed through dedicated editorial and scholarly effort—now is available to support further conjecture about how the poet evokes the source of the wall’s permanence in three startlingly poetically inventive ways. The first of these has to do with the wall’s nearly animated quality. The structure, as it is perceived in the anachronic moment of “now” in the imaginatively reconstructed past, is presented by the poet as being almost a living thing. This effect is suggested first by personification. What is described in these lines is not just a formidable enclosure. It is a thing that has ‘lived to see’ changes occurring more than likely circulated in the same milieu as Alfredian prose works (222), since its treatment of historical events is more orderly than Bede’s confused account of the same and related events, especially in Book I, chapters 11 and 12, of A History, 50-53. Johnson, “The Ruin as Body-City Riddle,” 402-05, calls attention to this feature of the poet’s language at this point in the poem.
around it—*Oft þæs wāg gebād* (9b). In addition to its evidencing this degree of animate/sensory response, the wall, as it is further considered, also reveals something of will—a dogged perseverance. This feature of its animation is suggested two ways, one in response to nature, the other, in response to artifice. The latter can be heard in the fact that the wall has lived to see, come and go, one reign after another—*Oft þæs wāg gebād . . . / rīce æfter ōþrum* (9b, 10b). The idea of ‘reign’ here, no doubt, is that of the emperor, the central administration of the empire. But the eighteen or more emperors who populate the third century between Caracalla and Diocletian are probably not what the poet has in mind when using the word *rīce*. More than likely, at the forefront of thinking here, are the significant administrations whose policies had a direct effect on the “līmes” in Britannia, usually in the form of re-garrisoning the frontier system. Included in this group, if known at the time, would probably have been the administrations of Pius, Severus, Caracalla, Valerian, Diocletian, and Constantius, and closer to home, those perhaps of the unsuccessful challengers Albinus, Carausius, and Allectus. Perseverance as a distinct feature of the wall’s animation in regard to nature is presented through the wall’s seemingly timeless ability to withstand the full, continuing destructive force of the weather. Remaining unaffected by any meteorological phenomena, the wall stands firm, as the poet declares—*ofstonden under storum* (11a), ‘having withstood assault of storms.’ The timeless quality of this singular steadfastness is also indicated by the weathering clearly visible on the surface itself of the wall’s many stones. The color of their surface, over the years, has been changed to grey-green, by lichen growing on them, and rust-red, by the oxidation of the iron cramps that secure the footings and probably some coursing of stones above—*raēghār on rēadhāh* (10a), ‘grey with lichen and red-stained.’

48 Jumbled and confused as it is at times, even Bede’s history provides names of many Roman emperors for his contemporary readers. Furthermore, Bede’s reference to “ambitious despots” leading warrior Britons off to their deaths (51) may even be acknowledgement of Albinus, Carausius, or Allectus, or any combination of two of them.

49 In arguing Chester may be the actual site of the poem, Dunleavy, “A ‘De Excidio’ Tradition.” 116-17, calls attention to the red Bunter Sandstone on which Chester stands. This stone, he suggests, is the source of the color referred to in line 10a. While there certainly is something to his argument about the use of Bunter Sandstone in Romano-British
The next way the poet reveals the wall’s source of permanence is through an anatomy of the wall’s architecture itself, which moves the anachronistic moment of imagined perception of the wall retrospectively along the poem’s now implicit historical continuum. The poet begins this further backward-looking examination, first, by calling attention metaphorically to a previous collapse of the fortress-city’s buildings—Stēa[p], gēap gedrēas (11b), the ‘High, [the] arched [buildings] fell.’ This act of distinguishing between buildings whose relatively weak architectural structure, over time, has caused them to collapse, and the wall, the solidity and design of which has enabled it to continue to stand and to endure the elements, invites further consideration of what constitutes this unique quality of the wall put in place at the time of its construction, a measurable time prior to the assault upon the fortress-city, as we have seen, that eventually leaves the city buildings in ruins. Revelation of the wall’s unique structure insuring its longevity follows immediately and, though fragmentary, appears to be evinced by the poet in two different, but complementary, ways. The first of these has to do with body structure itself. Suggesting strength, hardness, density, stability, substantiality, and unity, the poet’s description, begun in the present tense, acknowledges, in the first damaged line of the first lacuna, the continuity of the wall’s remarkable order and spatial dimension. More than likely, what can be retrieved from the line’s second hemistich—[n]um gehēapen (12b), ‘wonderfully? piled high’—underscores the unwavering position of the stones despite the time that has passed since their initial installation and coursing.

frontier-system construction in the West, that the red color is introduced in the poem with the grey effect resulting from the encrustation created by the lichen on the stone suggests the red, like the grey, is not intrinsic to the stone but rather the result of weathering. The iron cramps would certainly have rusted and caused this effect, as one can see today, for example, at Housesteads (Borovovicium).

50 Klinck, “A Damaged Passage,” 165, suggests that gehēapen (12b), ‘piled up,’ and not gehēawen, ‘cut (down),’ is the more likely word in this instance, yet another example of the poet’s tendency to use strong forms of commonly weak verbs, a point she reaffirms in her edition of the poem, The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition, 212, n12a-b, and so invites the conjectural reconstruction of [n] in [n]um as [r] in wundrum (12b), ‘wonderfully.’ Keeping the MS reading of the line here makes sense when considered in light of weall wundrum héah, which appears in Wanderer, 98a.
What is more, this implied continuity of construction is anticipated in the line’s first hemistich by the adverb *giet*, as well as by the line’s first word, *Wu[n]að* (12a), if Klinck’s argument regarding the sense demanded by the first hemistich’s adverb is correct. Since its construction, the wall has thus ‘remained steadfast,’ despite the changes, even the catastrophic events that have happened to what was contained within its perimeter, and behind its archway gate.

The second way the poet conducts the anatomy of the wall’s structure is by calling attention to the relationships implicit in the wall’s body structure through identification of the means connecting the stones above the footings—that is, by revealing what is fundamental to the vertical and horizontal runs of the wall-stone construction. It is at this point that significant damage to the manuscript appearing in the first lacuna is encountered (a gap of 9.5 cms. follows). Only the line’s first word and two possible letters are retrievable here. Not much can be made of the letters except to identify them, as Klinck and Leslie, before her, have done. The verb *Fēlon* (13a), however, offers conjectural interpretive possibilities. Klinck has indicated that ‘persisted’ or ‘have persisted’ for that verb “would accord well with ‘remains’ in the previous line.” This conjectural rendering of the word’s sense, she suggests, is consistent, both literally and figuratively, given *Fēlon*’s relationship to *Fēolan*. If her surmise is correct, then the function of line 13 would be, in part, to reaffirm the enduring quality of the wall’s body structure articulated by the previous line. If, however, the third person preterit of the verb *Fēlon* is rendered as ‘they adhered’ or ‘they have cloven,’ another conjectural interpretive possibility, then the adhesive quality binding the stones would be what emerges in this instance as the object of scrutiny and favorable remark. Such an emphasis would not be unanticipated, given the function of mortar in Roman wall-stone construction,


52 *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition*, 212, n13a, and, *Three Old English Elegies*, 70, n13, respectively.


and especially given the importance attached to the principle of the triad, the third thing of some sort, the tertium quid, that always is necessary to join two disparate things together, even though cement was rarely used in late-medieval large-stone construction.55

The phrase grimme gegrunde[n] (14a), ‘severely ground,’ which Klinck puts at the beginning of the next line in view of the two words’ double alliteration, is construed by her to mean something having to do with weapons,56 though even the lineation of the fragments here is uncertain owing to continued manuscript damage (a gap of 8.75 cms. follows gegrunde[n]). What perhaps led Klinck to this conjecture might be the pervasive image in Middle English poetry of sharpening the sword or axe, the most memorable example of which is heard when Sir Gawain, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, approaches the Green Chapel to meet his doom.57 But an equally plausible explanation of the two words in the phrase here should not be ignored, especially if the adhesive quality of mortar, the means of bonding the stones and establishing and securing their coursing in the wall, is, in fact, being suggested by the word Fēlon at the beginning of the previous line. The act of ‘severely grinding’ or rubbing down to a powder silica, aluminum, lime, and (sometimes) clay, a necessary step in preparing mortar’s ingredients, may introduce the masonry process of levigation at this moment to explain perhaps how the connection—the action of that third thing of some sort, that masonry tertium quid—between the stones actually is prepared in anticipation of construction. The possible reconstruction offered by Ferdinand Holthausen, and accepted in part by Klinck,58 of the next fragmentary line follows:

. . . hædre scān heofontungol . . . (15a and 15b)
(' . . . brightly it shined the heavenly luminary . . .').59

55 On the importance of the tertium quid in medieval thinking, see Lewis, The Discarded Image, 43-44.

56 “A Damaged Passage,” 166.

57 Gawain’s advance is suddenly stopped when hearing the “wonder breme noyse . . . / As one vpon a gryndelston hade grounden a syþe.” See Davis, 61, ll. 2200-02.


As reconstructed here, the line certainly does not extend this idea of mortar’s adhesive quality. However, while Holthausen’s heofontungol is conjectural, agreement exists that heo’s placement at the beginning of the MS second half-line indicates the original presence of a longer word. Substitution of heofontimber, ‘heavenly structure,’ for heofontungol, words of approximately the same length, could thus extend the sense of the adhesive while invoking the Platonic triad, which logically would not be out of keeping with a poetic meditation on the seemingly divine binding quality of wall-stone construction cement. Reference to the condition of being ‘ingenious’ and to the ‘ancient craft’ or ‘ancient work,’ at the end and beginning of each hemistich, respectively, comprise the next fragmentary line:

\[ g \text{ orf} \text{onc} \quad \text{ǣrsceaf} \quad \text{t} \quad (16a-16b). \]

These references would not be unexpected expressions included in a conclusion to an analysis of the medium that makes a wall-stone construction cohere, that makes many stones, one stone-construction, or a wall. Nor would what is included in the final fragment of this portion of the poem be out of keeping with the conclusion to the anatomy of sorts that has just preceded it. While only the letter \( g \) is identifiable in the first half line of line 17 (the first half of the line is missing), the second hemistich’s expression lāmринdum bēag (17b), ‘with clay coating [painted plaster] it curved or bent,’ perhaps the most memorable instance of an hapax legomenon in the poem, aptly completes the anatomy by providing a masonry metaphor having to do with the process of “dressing a wall,” or by providing what today would be called, to complete the previously used anatomy metaphor, the closing up or finishing of the procedure.

The final way the poet evokes the permanence of the wall, which implicitly moves further back in time the current retrospective visualized meditation on the wall to yet an earlier anachronistic point in the imagined past when the wall was first constructed and the fortress-city first established, introduces the idea animating the

\[ 60 \text{ The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition, 213, n15; also see Leslie, Three Old English Elegies, 70-71, n15.} \]
engineering principle fundamental to the wall’s construction—the principle, for the poet, that presumably informed and enabled all Roman large-stone works, such as fortifications, dams, aqueducts, bridges, etc., to stand indefinitely, as many examples have until the present day. What is revealed at this point in the poem is that the footing of the wall, the course of the wall’s foundational stones that holds everything positioned above in place, is established by taking what is naturally occurring, the large stones, and treating them coercively by means of the engineering art of wall-stone construction—that is, by fitting and binding them together with that third thing of some sort, that tertium quid, which in this case is the iron strip, in the form of a ring, or cramp. Like the fasces, the Roman symbol of magisterial authority and power of unity through the determined application of various arts to nature, embodied by the inextricable bound bundling of rods around the ax, this like kind of architectural “bound bundling,” a wonder to behold, then as now, makes the footing course consisting of many stones, as well as every course of stones above it, one stone, a “wāg” or a ‘bulwark,’ a unity resulting from multiplicity:

\[
\text{. . . in hringas } \text{hygerōf gebond}
\text{weall walanwīrum } \text{wundrum tōgædre} \quad (19a-20b)
\]

(‘. . . into rings the stout-hearted bound
[the] wall with strips of metal wonderfully together’).

It is important to remember here that while the 
hygerōf (19b), the ‘stout-hearted,’ actually engaged in the physical labor of setting
the stones at the beginning of the wall’s construction, it is actually
the 
hwætrēd (19a), those ‘acute in thought,’ who conceived of this
engineering principle in the first place that forever physically and
politically changed Britannia’s landscape and the eventual history
of the island’s occupation by Rome. It is no accident the poet thus
identifies these two parts of the work force by means of adjectival
terms that clearly distinguish them, for while the project could not
have been undertaken without the stout-heartedness and physical
strength of those ready and obliged to toil willfully, it could not
have even been begun without the determination of the chief

engineer, master-builder, or ‘royal artisan’—that is, he who was 'acute in thought,' hwætērēd—whose mind, in an instant, the poet indicates, preserves the full likeness of its divine creator, “The Firste Moevere of the cause above.” Though engagement of mind here does occur within time and space—Mōd mofnade (18a), ‘Mind prompted,’ as the conjugation of the verb indicates, what comes of this engagement appears to be expression of the neo-Platonic conception of the original concept of a thing, or the “Idea”—myneswifne gebrægd (18b), ‘quick-minded clever idea,’ which, instantaneously moving the retrospective anachronistic meditation on the wall now to time before time—that is, into the imagined infinite “Now,” when mind is perfectly “waiting upon” the unmoved mover—permits introduction of the paradoxical event consisting of the presence in the created or profane of the uncreated or the divine. Thus, not a moment of diminution, what the poet offers here is a moment of augmentation, an imagined glimpse of “Lux Aeterna’s” effect in and on the world through an idea generating and resulting, in this instance, in an eternal monumental architectural construction.

The implicit consequence of this implied divine fostering presence in actuality, of course, is the unique construction of the wall, which insures its eternal duration. The explicit consequence of this implied presence, the description of which follows immediately in the poem, consists of what the wall, as enclosure or enceinte, engenders in turn—namely, the vibrant community of the fortress-city. In fact, the vigor and energy of this community appear to be a direct function of the informing indwelling presence of something divine in and about the wall’s physical presence and structure. This resultant liveliness or animation is evoked by the poet in two remarkable ways. The first, to give it the breadth and depth of three dimensions, is through an appeal to all five senses, emphasized by the use of the present tense and a brief, second deployment of an asyndetic parataxis (21a-23b), this time almost creating the illusion of convivial comradeship through a syntactical concordant discord. The visual, thus, is revealed immediately through the brightness of the city’s many buildings—Beorht wēron burgræced (21a), ‘Bright were dwellings in the fortress-city.’ The tactile is suggested by the

61 Macrobius, On the Dream of Scipio, 86. Also see note 27 above.
baths—\textit{burnsele monige} (21b), ‘bathhouses many.’ Sound also can be heard in either of two ways—indistinctly, in a kind of background noise, from the ‘great noise of a company of warriors,’ \textit{heresweg micel} (22b), or distinctly and fully from ‘the mirth or celebration of men,’ \textit{moneðrēama full} (23b). And smell and taste are evoked by the many ‘mead-halls’ found within the city and, presumably, by the many cups of drink consumed therein—\textit{meodoheall monig} (23a). The second way the energy and vigor of this Romano-British community are suggested is through the expression of social interaction. Explicit examples of this condition include the already-mentioned indistinct and the more distinct, emotionally-generated sounds coming from the taverns. In their cups, the warriors and men, in thongs, join in voice, indistinct and distinct, to create this effect. Implicit examples also are present. The many ‘high-arched structures,’ the bright dwellings—\textit{hēah horngestrēon} (22a)—imply individuals living in close proximity, presumably enjoying each other’s company, unified at least by the same purpose that had put them there, together, at the empire’s northwest frontier. The baths that are many, presumably both public and private, are also sites of such implied interaction. While always places of relaxation, hygiene, and ceremonial ablution, they were, like their counterparts in the empire’s southern regions, places where the latest of community interest was shared and the greatest of individual attention was understood to be given, either by slave or facility attendant.

\textbf{IV}

Contributing to this liveliness of the fortress-city engendered and insured by the wall’s divinely-inspired and divinely-informed permanence that paradoxically can crush even the Fates is the wall’s cultural purpose as a defensive enclosure or enceinte, which is revealed by the poet three ways. The first of these, the one having to do with the expansionist militarism fundamental to the Roman Empire, occupies attention at the beginning of the initial, undamaged portion of the second scene of construction in the poem,
starting at line 32b and ending at line 34b. The presentation of this aspect of purpose before the other two makes sense given the emphasis Rome placed upon territorial expansion through conquest as principal means of realizing imperial political and economic policies. The great company of warriors among the ‘many men,’ the *beorn monig* (32b), are described as being dressed in their war gear or ‘war-trappings’—*wīghyrstum* (34b)—in this instance, the tunic with cloak, the leather apron with the metal discs, the leather sandals with the iron-studded soles, the “pīlum” perhaps in hand (reminiscent of Minerva’s lance), and the large belts with the double-bladed, pointed sword and dagger. Unusual about some of these trappings, however, is their brightness, suggesting decoration of sorts, the decoration reserved for special occasions and certainly not worn in combat. The war gear’s trappings in these instances are said to have ‘shined’—*scan* (34b)—and these particular warriors are apparently decked out in precious metal—*goldbeorht* (33a), ‘bright with gold’—wearing all kinds of decoration on their dress—*glēoma gefrætwed* (33b), ‘brightly adorned’—and appearing as a wonder to behold, “*wlonc*” (34a), or that which is ‘splendid.’

So bright and ornamental is the appearance of some of these men, in fact, that it invites illustrative comparison with that of one C. Gavius Silvanus, a legionary, perhaps even a member of the Praetorian Guard, who was singled out by Emperor Claudius for his service in Britain. In the inscription recording this particular military honor, Gavius is said to have been granted “neck-chains, armlets, medals and a gold crown in the British war.” While no such service distinction is evident in the Old English poem, the unsullied, almost luminous condition of the attire of some of these warriors, as the poet amplifies it through synonym, suggests, nevertheless, that something unusual is happening—perhaps that the legionaries here are celebrating a battle won and heroes identified and rewarded, or are just celebrating new arrivals, whose joy and conviviality have not yet been tempered by the hardships soon to be experienced through life and work as members of a frontier fortress-city garrison. The implicit energetic joyousness of this social gathering also suggests

that others of the fortress-city may be drinking with these new comrades in the many small taverns, the “caupōnae,” found within the city’s walls. Such an inference would make sense at an installation of this sort since a battle won or the arrival of reinforcements would always have been cause for extended, exuberant celebration.\textsuperscript{63} The wine, not ale, consumed by these soldiers and men, probably “vīnum”—rather than the usual fare, “ăcētum”—given the specialness of the occasion and its general festive atmosphere, calls attention to the second way the wall serves the cultural purpose as defensive enclosure. This way has to do with economics, the reason in the first place for the ‘far-flung kingdom’s’ presence in this part of the world. Reference to the wine that has raised the spirits of all those who now are in their cups, veterans and possibly newly-arrived legionaries alike, may not be a moralistic expression of disapprobation, as some have hitherto suggested.\textsuperscript{64} Rather than being ‘wicked with wine,’ in other words, the members of the garrison appear, instead, to be enjoying the alternative, a joyful time, the result of their intense social interaction and being ‘elated with wine’—“wīngāl” (34a).\textsuperscript{65} This joyful behavior certainly calls attention to the communal liveliness of this installation. But what it also reveals by implication is perhaps a renewed spirit of optimism in the province regarding its increasing commercialism, the result of the reason for the conquest, in the first place, and the result, in the second place, of the subsequent centuries of occupation. The wine in the cups now, more than likely, is not the importation of a luxury

\textsuperscript{63} Focusing on the “martial noise, the mead-halls, the drinking, and the riches of a legendary tribe,” without a “toga in sight,” and on inclusion of the rune at the beginning of line 25b, Critten suggests the poem’s speaker is imagining a Germanic past (218), much the way Beaston does previously when suggesting the speaker populates the city with Germanic warriors (484). These moments in the poem, however, reveal not only a truth about members of all warrior cultures—that they are alike when celebrating arrival of reinforcements or victory—but also a clue as to who they actually are: their drink of choice, wine (wīn, as in wīngāl), is not on the menu at Heorot.

\textsuperscript{64} See, for example, Talento, “Moral Irony,” 9-10; Doubleday, “The Ruin,” 378-79.

\textsuperscript{65} As an adjective, gal may imply “wicked” as Talento argues rather tortuously, but it may also be introduced here to offer the less censorious implication of ‘gay,’ ‘light,’ or ‘wanton.’ See, for example, all entries under this word in Bosworth-Toller, An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, 359, and Clark-Hall, A Concise Anglo-Saxon dictionary, 147.
article from the Continent, which it had been in the first and second centuries, though such foreign trade did continue to some extent until the Saxon invasion. Rather, it is probably evidence of the new agricultural industry within Britannia itself, competing with that of Celtic beer, capable of satisfying the growing demand for a good that had previously been considered solely a trade item of Roman and Gallic merchants. The edict of Emperor Probus in the 270s C.E. permitting home-grown wine, making policy what had no doubt been custom for some time, probably did much to stimulate this feature of Britannia’s Romanization through industry and commerce. What is more, a new socio-economic reality affecting the empire’s northwest frontier province in the later third century cannot be ignored: while the volume of imports into Britain was declining by this time, and while Britannia was experiencing significant demographic changes, it was actually, in great part, becoming more self-sufficing.66

More important than products of agriculture, however, is the poem’s next identification of one of Britannia’s oldest and most valuable exports, excluding slaves. As the warriors energetically clink cups and participate in their rounds of drinking, the poet reveals that the principal source of their immediate delight, the object of their ‘gaze’ (35a), is the precious metal sylfor (35a), as well as the searogimmas (35b), the ‘cunningly wrought jewels,’ the curious finished gem stones mined from the land. Though not an article of commerce since it was considered state property, silver quickly became the principal product of the flourishing Romano-British lead-mining industry, an industry established within six years of the Claudian invasion of the island and primarily, but not exclusively, based geographically along the Mendips and the Pennines. Historically, lead had been very much in demand by Romans, especially for complex plumbing construction involving water-pipes, sluices, cisterns, etc. But the “chief object” in working the lead, as Collingwood and Myers explain, “. . . was to obtain silver,” which was extracted from the ore by cupellation.67 The ‘cunningly wrought jewels,’ testimony regarding

66 Collingwood and Myers, Roman Britain, 227.

67 Collingwood and Myers, Roman Britain, 229-31.
Romano-British miners’ engineering activities and Romano-British jewelers’ artistic expertise, were also a product of the limited gold-mining and the widely diffused bronze-working industries. The former occurred primarily in Dolaucothy in Carmarthenshire, where goldsmiths worked on the spot, close to the mines, as archeological evidence indicates. And bronze workers, found in most towns of any considerable size, accounted for much of the production in that metal and in related handicrafts, though evidence of large-scale operations has been found in the north and west.

Acknowledging these sources of wealth by means of a series of prepositional phrases, as the poet does, thus permits consideration of their value discretely as well as creating, rhetorically, the impression of an alteration in focus regarding each precious item itself, as seen by one individual, moving progressively by reverse telescoping from generality to specificity and then, by reversing the process itself, by moving from specificity to generality again, before coming to the observation’s conclusion:

\[ \text{sēah on sinc, on sylfor, on searogimmas, on ēad, on ēht . . .} \]

(‘[where] one gazed upon treasure, upon silver, upon cunningly wrought jewels, upon riches, upon possessions . . .’). Calling attention to ‘treasure,’ then to cupellated ‘silver,’ then to the ‘cunningly wrought jewels,’ then to ‘riches,’ and then, finally, to ‘possessions,’ before readying for the end, dramatizes and so emphasizes the engineering of lead smelting and cupellation, the artistry of jewelry-making, and the financial reward resulting from both, expressed at the center of this process of subject-focus telescoping. The reason for doing this, however, is not so much to foreground specific examples of such finely wrought Romano-British work, specimens of which today, lamentably, are few and far between, though serendipitous discoveries of such evidence have been made and do continue to occur.\(^68\) Instead, it appears to be done

\(^68\) Scullard, *Roman Britain*, 131, indicates a hoard of jewelry—armlets and necklaces, mostly—was found at Pumpsaint village, in southwest Wales, a site where goldsmiths probably worked. Beaston, 477-78, calls attention to the Anglo-Saxon treasure hoard accidentally unearthed in Staffordshire in 2009. But not much more Romano-British work is available except minor finds such as those reported under the Portable Antiquities Scheme.
to underscore the importance of the miners’, engineers’, and artisans’ skills, or “artĭfĭcĭum” itself in its most general, positive sense. Emphasizing the fact that the Romano-British were masters of such arts and skills, as well as masters of other arts, such as those of war, commerce, masonry, mining, and large wall-stone construction, as the poem has thus far done explicitly and implicitly, prepares for the final revelation of the Romano-British also as leaders in the advanced engineering art of hydro-mechanics, the combination of civil and mechanical-engineering arts that made possible the experience of the principal social as well as near-spiritual activity of Rome’s Mediterranean culture, bathing or “lăvātĭo,” even in the boreal climate of northern Britannia. Accordingly, the conclusion to this extended expression of amazement, anticipated by one prepositional phrase after another, is the distinction of the beorhtan burg (37a), the ‘bright fortress-city’ of the brādan rīces (37a-37b), of the ‘far-flung kingdom,’ by means of the implied comparison between it and the eorcastān (36b), the ‘precious stone,’ or gem, a thing whose material splendor results as much from its intrinsic worth as from the artistic effect of skillfully cutting and shaping it by the artisan or jeweler:

\[ \text{on eorcanstān,} \]
\[ \text{on þās beorhtan burg brādan rīces} \quad (36b-37b) \]
\[ (‘\text{upon [this] precious stone,} \]
\[ \text{upon this bright fortress-city of far-flung kingdom’).} \]

V

Considering the fortress-city in this figurative way, as well as suggestively identifying the presence of the divine in it, as previously in the wall-stone construction, invites, as the poem’s remaining fragmentary lines do, examination of how the poem presents the Romano-British as masters of the particular combination of advanced civil-, mechanical-, and hydro-mechanical engineering arts, and why this mastery, which resulted in this cynelic āing (48b), this ‘kingly or splendid thing,’ is significant culturally. Lamentably, however, this portion of the poem is not fully intact owing to the that have since revealed some precious metal work in other parts of Roman Britain. See, for example, Worrell and Pearce, “Finds Reported,” Item 15: 419. Also see Birley, Life in Roman Britain, 122-24.
second, more extensive, instance of manuscript damage starting at line 42b and continuing until the work’s end. But again, as is the case in regard to the poem’s first lacuna, enough fragmentary evidence has been retrieved here, through painstaking editing and prudent conjecture, to call attention to a consistency of emphasis on the part of the poet that appears to point with admiration, one more time, in the direction of the various engineering arts and artistic skills associated with Romano-British culture.

In order to focus on this combination of engineering arts, attention at this point in the poem is turned, not to the fortress-city’s burnsele monige, but rather, for purposes of illustration and careful consideration, to just one bæð, to emphasize instructively its unique architectural permanence, arrangement, and mechanical complexity. Unlike the tall, graceful arches of wood-framed buildings, the dwellings of the legionaries, that are gebrocen to beorgum (32a), that are ‘broken into a heap,’ victims of Fate like their builders, as the poem earlier indicates (24a and b), the bæð, the social center of fortress-city life, 69 consists of permanent heavy-stone construction like the enormous wall encompassing it, and like the even greater wall encompassing the city:

\[
\text{Stānhofu stōdan; strēam hāte wearp,}
\text{wīdan wylme (38a-39a)}
\]

(‘Stone buildings stood; moving water with heat gushed, with wide surging’).

This feature of the bath, probably the direct result of the Severan and Caracallan frontier-system heavy-stone restoration programs initiated at the beginning of—and continuing through—the third century C.E., is a practical use of indigenous construction material since, as a structure, this building housing running waters, pools, sluices, etc., had to be reinforced and made as sound as the fortress-city’s defensive bulwarks to contain the pressure exerted by the water while withstanding its long-term corrosive effect. In addition to the solidity of its construction, this particular building is shown to be carefully designed so to permit movement of waters under pressure, waters that ‘gush’ or flow out, and that can even be

69 Scullard, Roman Britain, 101, makes this point in regard to baths found in most fortress-cities. They were not only necessary for hygiene, but also functioned “as social centers where citizens could meet, exercise or relax, and gossip.”
made to ‘surge’ or move as if in waves, within pools or baths.\textsuperscript{70}

This achievement in hydro-mechanics and other engineering arts, implicit in the first description of the moving and surging heated waters, is elaborated in the later, fragmentary lines of the poem comprising the final part of this second scene of construction. Despite the extensive damage to the manuscript at this point, at least two things about this combination of engineering arts, the poet indicates, should be remembered, to appreciate the sophistication of Roman expertise in these related fields. The first is the control of the water’s volume and temperature. The gushing of the water, suggested by word-choice and verb conjugation, is something that can be determined implicitly by the facility operators. They can ‘let’ hot waters gush or, by implication, stop such movement of flow, which implies knowledge, to some degree, of water pressure, and knowledge of manipulating piping running from an aqueduct of some sort:

\begin{verbatim}
Lēton þonne gēotan ofer h[ārn]e stān hāte strēamas (42a-43b)
(‘They let therefore gush over grey stone hot moving waters’).
\end{verbatim}

The second is the ability to direct the flow of large volumes of water from one containment facility to another. The waters gush over the ‘grey stones’ and presumably continue through some sort of course or lead pipe until reaching the ‘circular pool’—

\begin{verbatim}
Lēton þonne gēotan ofer h[ārn]e stān hāte strēamas,
un[\ldots] hāte strēamas, [\ldots] hāte--
[b]æt hringmere hāte--
\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots pēr ūh bāpu wǣron (42a-46b)
\end{verbatim}

(‘They let therefore gush over grey stone hot moving waters,
and until the circular pool with heat--

\textsuperscript{70} As they advanced in the hydro-mechanical engineering arts, so did Roman engineers engaged in other equally advanced civil-engineering endeavors. See, for example, the technique of cambering and creating precision-cut stone mosaic patterning of road pavements in important imperial roads, especially those leading to and not distant from Rome. See Von Hagen, \textit{The Roads}, 8-71.
What this final distinction suggests is that the hydro-mechanical system, along with heating and plumbing systems, envisioned here is, indeed, a complex of systems including lead pipes, ducts, pools, hypocausts, furnaces, etc., functioning in concert, like that found in many even modest Romano-British fortress-city baths of the late third century.71

The importance of mastering all the engineering arts drawn together to create and maintain the baths is indicated by the poet through revelation of the unique, rejuvenating, nearly spiritual, experience that the hot moving waters have on one immersed in them. These hot moving waters, gushing with wide surging, within permanent and solid enclosures, provide the opportunity for hygiene, relaxation, and social interaction, all of which activities have the potential to be as gratifying and pleasurable as they are necessary for continued good health. But because the facility itself represents the perfection or even apotheosis of concerted practical application of several Roman engineering arts to recreate ingeniously the cultural bathing experience of the southern or Mediterranean world in the northern latitudes of Britannia, the site’s architectural and engineering accomplishment appears also to invite the opportunity for engagement in the aesthetic experience of the spirit of the place. The bath, in other words, appears to be presented as being as divinely inspired and informed—as having, 71 Scullard, *Roman Britain*, 102, indicates an illustrative example of this complexity of plumbing is implicit in the baths at Calleva (Silchester), where, moving through the entry way into the building, first is located the latrine next to the portico, afterward the palaestra and apodyterium, then the frigidarium, next the tepidarium, and, finally, the caldarium. Whether the complexity of the plumbing in the poem suggests that of Aquae Sulis, however, remains to be seen. A number of things said by the poet may or may not point in this direction. His use of burnsele, for example, suggests multiple bath-houses within a fortress-city rather than pools within one establishment; his description of the hot waters reaching the circular pool reveals a misunderstanding of the cold plunge effect afforded by the great Circular Bath of Aquae Sulis, which dates from the early second century; his references to hot waters can be explained by hypocausts and furnaces that were often used to heat water where hot water was desired, so the description of the ‘waters surging with heat’ does not necessarily imply a geo-thermal spring; and his interest in water pressure can be accounted for by sluices from aqueducts and pumps that could be engaged quite easily to create a gushing effect. Yet Leslie’s three-part argument, *Three Old English Elegies*, 23-25, offered nearly half a century ago regarding Auqae Sulis as the subject of the poet’s poem, is still very convincing if the poet’s early-English lack of understanding of the Circular Bath’s ablutionary function is excused and if reference to þēr þā baþu wǣron is substituted for burnsele in Leslie’s discussion. See Blair, *Roman Britain*, 105-06, for such a conjecture.
in this case, its own genius loci, in its design and construction\textsuperscript{72}— as do the skillfully wrought gems and thoroughly smelted lead to produce cupellated silver before it, as well as does the fortress-city’s stunning bulwark construction introduced at the beginning of the group of other Romano-British achievements lauded by the poet.

Indigenous Italic religion, the nucleus of archaic Roman religion, depended on the belief that spirits, or numina, existed in natural objects and controlled human destiny. These same spirits were held in awe and placated with offerings and prayers. The object of such placation was to secure peace between gods and humankind. This peace, a contractual propitiatory and expiatory relationship, insured, in turn, harmony as well as the correct order for living, growing things, producing things, etc. Early on, numina in the form of Janus or Lares and Penates, household gods, were also recognized and therefore associated with constructed space—the former with the threshold, the latter with the larder and hearth. Lares and Penates, illustratively, are memorialized in Book III of Virgil’s \textit{Aeneid} as Aeneas encounters them in his dream. They, the very ones he had carried from Troy, tell him to flee Crete and move on to Hesperia to establish the new city.\textsuperscript{73}

The logic for associating numina with other examples of constructed space, thus, was well established in Roman thinking and archaic religious observation and practice long before the Old English poem’s earliest implied anachronistic temporal moment in the past when the imagined fortress-city was first constructed and enjoyed a peace insuring that its baths could be used to their fullest extent as sites for and sources of physical rejuvenation, social enjoyment, and even spiritual contemplation, especially for bathers in a state of repose.

Just what god or goddess would be associated with the marvel of the civil- and hydro-mechanical arts needed to construct such facilities as the baths was partially determined early in Roman history, too, by the association between Minerva and the mindful spirit of skill, \textsuperscript{72}For thorough and instructive discussion of the classical genius figure as it pertains here, see Nitzsche, \textit{The Genius Figure}, 7-41.

\textsuperscript{73} Virgil, \textit{Aeneid}, 292-93, ll. 505-14.
an association to which Etruscans had given shape by means of the appearance of Pallas Athena, and one that was perpetuated by the scientific branches of the Roman armies spearheading the expansion of the empire. Accordingly, the late first-century construction of the geo-thermal baths in Britannia at Aquae Sulis (Bath), with the temple dedicated to Sulis Minerva, an arrangement of buildings acknowledged by the Roman writer and medieval curriculum author Solinus in his late-third-century *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, a collection of notable phenomena from the empire that identifies the Romano-British geo-thermal baths as a site over which the goddess duly presided, demonstrates just how firmly established the linkage was between the rejuvenating waters of the bath and Minerva or the mindful spirit of skill which was as fundamental to the engineering arts as to all forms of artistic endeavor, even as early as the first decade following the Claudian invasion of Britain.

Hardly is it a rational or even an imaginative leap, thus, to suggest that Romano-British legionaries made the association between Minerva and the baths in fortress-cities other than the Roman geo-thermal spa located at Bath. Those less elaborate facilities, like the one at Calleva (Silchester), as an illustrative example, may not have had temples dedicated to the goddess or even ornamentation on their buildings like the famous decorative Gorgon head, at Aquae Sulis. But this association was still there at least in thinking, if not in minor statuary, frescoes, or even floor mosaic pictorial representations like that of the Capitoline Triad’s “regulator of great destinies.” Just how much of that linkage was known to later generations, especially to that of the eighth-century Old English poet, however, has not yet been ascertained, though the poem’s possible association with Alfredian works may be a fruitful means of discovering the answer. But what is stated in the poem at this point suggests an understanding that the possibility of animistic


75 Collingwood and Myers, *Roman Britain*, 263.

76 Cunliffe, *Roman Bath discovered*, 8. Cunliffe also points out that the second-century geographer Ptolemy calls Bath Aquae Calidae.

77 Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, I: 306-10, offers this characterization of Minerva’s function. Also see Ferguson, *The Religions*, 34 and 215.
aesthetic experience, in the anachronistic moment of the fortress-city’s heyday in the poem’s imagined past, involves implicitly the potential presence in the bath of a numen of some sort, or at least a mindful meditative readiness to be accepting of such a presence.

This nod in the direction of idolatrous Roman religion’s implicit system of polytheism associated with advanced engineering arts skill certainly does not invite consideration of the poet’s possible incorporation in the work at this juncture of yet another historical feature of Roman social life associated with the bath—namely, the annual bathing event of Fortuna Virilis (also, later, the celebration known as the Veneralia) occurring on April 1, the day “Roman women of the lower class honored Fortuna Virilis, who represented good fortune in relations with men,” by bathing with men in their baths.78 That would be going too far, even for a creatively innovative and daring poet like the poem’s author. The assumed license and potential for immodest behavior associated with such an activity, however, would not have been unknown to the eighth-century poet like him, especially in light of what previous reformists and moralists in the not-too-distant past had to say about Roman baths and bathing culture during the late-imperial period.79

But as the poem turns attention at this moment to the facility’s wall, not simply to its well or pool, as Stuart A. Baker suggested some time ago,80—

Stānhofu stōdan; strēam hāte wēarp, wīdan wylme. Weal eall befēng beorhtan bōsme, þǣr þā baþu wǣ[r]on, hāt on hreþre. (38a-41a)


79 Doubleday, “The Ruin,” 380, observes that the “use of the baths to promote adultery is reproved by Quintilian as well as by Christian moralists; the Justinian code made lascivious mixed bathing (‘commune lavacrum viris libidinis causa’) grounds for divorce.” He adds, however, that despite “the Church’s disapproval, the practice of mixed bathing seems to have continued through the medieval period, as the penitentials show.” Some of his citations are worth repeating here to illustrate how concerned the moralists really were in regard to the baths and the kind of cultural experience associated with them. See, for example, the condemnation of lascivious mixed bathing in Clement of Alexandria, *Paidagoge*, III, v, in *Opera*, Stühlin, I, in *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*, XII, 254-55. Also see the example of lascivious mixed bathing as grounds for divorce in *Codex Justinianus*, V, 17, 11, in *Corpus iuris civilis*, II, 213.

80 “Weal in the Old English Ruin,” 328-29.
what becomes clear is that the bath’s wall of heavy-stone reinforced construction, like the fortress-city’s bulwark fostering the vibrant, lively city, encompasses by virtue of its similar steadfast presence yet another kind of vibrancy, another “gem,” as it were, one even more valuable than all the precious metals and stones mentioned earlier in the poem. This vibrancy or “gem,” an interpretive ambiguous figurative image-cluster, consists of the bath’s wall itself, the hot waters it permits continued experience of, and the implied transformative act of bathing, of being immersed in those rejuvenating waters, ‘for the bright bosom,’ the imagined presence of a polysemous metonymy, the beorhtan bōsme (40a).\(^{81}\)

The first facet of this implicitly animated “gem,” of this rejuvenating ‘heated moment for the spirit,’ provides initially the literal one, the source of a life-sustaining effect, the bath itself, in Britannia’s boreal climate, a life-sustaining effect like that of nourishment for the new-born provided by the actual anatomical beorht bōsm or ‘bright bosom.’ Offered also simultaneously by this singularly creative image-complex, the animated “gem’s” next facet, this next rejuvenating ‘heated moment for the spirit,’ is the allegorical one, in which the beorht bōsm, ‘the bright breast,’ introduces the idea of the source of life, the ‘womb,’ as bōsme is memorably used figuratively elsewhere in Old English poetry, in such lines as lides bōsme (Brunanburh, 27) and brimes bōsme (Andreas, 444).

And finally, the last facet of this startling animated bathing image-complex “gem” introduces yet another—and the last—rejuvenating

\(^{81}\) While the poem’s emphasis is upon celebration of Romano-British mastery of various arts, the poet, revealing his Christian awareness of the need to pierce the Scriptural letter to arrive at an “inner meaning” consistent with God’s word, nevertheless approaches his conclusion about that Romano-British mastery by presenting it partly in terms of the hermeneutical “treatment of Scripture” presented by Saint Augustine in *On Christian Doctrine*. See Miller, *Chaucer*, 53-57, and Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*. 

‘heated moment for the spirit,’ the anagogical one, another source of life, this time the rational as well as imaginative creativity of mind in life, through implied presence of the beorht bōsm, the metonymy in this instance of the presence of the intellectually nourishing and creative goddess Minerva or Pallas Athena, the goddess associated with the creative mind and skill, as well as with brightness, usually through illuminating flashes like those of lightning. This instantaneously perceived triple analogy, indeed a metaphoric cluster of hermeneutical rejuvenating ‘heated moments for the spirit,’ the consequence of which is a sudden participatory heightened consciousness resulting in singular creative authorial insight, like the moment of the previous full-blown creative idea, in a flash, experienced earlier in the poem by the hwætrēd (19a), the ‘acute in thought,’ for securing the wall to crush even the implacable Fates, demonstrates now fulfillment of the poem’s total effect—expression of the early medieval British mind’s engagement in the same kind and degree of creative thinking or participation in Romano-British “Lux Aeterna,” the creative vigorous thinking informing the culture of the ‘far-flung kingdom’ that once enabled cultural and practical adaptation to living in the boreal climate of Britannia for nearly half a millennium. It is for this reason that the immediately following, nearly humorous, exclamation—a rarity in Old English poetry and so an expostulation calling attention to itself for purposes of emphasis—Þæt wæs hȳðelic (41b), ‘That was handy!’ references, without moralizing, this moment of achieved creative insight, this sudden and complete early-medieval British link with the Romano-British past. Such a judgment is thus an acknowledgement of having attained the same clarity and power of the creative mind, the same participation in “Lux Aeterna,” which earlier lines of the

82 For this and related attributes, see Gayley, The Classic Myths, 23.

83 The conclusion here regarding convenience rather than moral probity, the absence of the tropological or moral significance, is not unexpected given the poem’s emphasis, not on conformity to Scriptural direction, but on the always pagan creative interface between the divine and the actual.
poem have previously praised in a variety of ways regarding the
demonstrable creativity of the Romano-British mind. Articulated
convincingly here, in other words, is acknowledgment, thus, of a
very meaningful point of connection between the experience of
Romanity and that of Christianized early-medieval British culture.84

VI

Much of what appears in Codex Exoniensis, fols. 123b -124b, is thus
recast by the poet to give it, yet again, new and stunningly different
meaning. This fact about the poem may explain the motive for the two
instances of manuscript destruction that, ironically and lamentably,
affect the image sequences or tableaux of construction in the work.
Indeed, it is not difficult to understand how the creative efforts in
the poem to recuperate distinct features of Romanness might have
been considered anathema to orthodox belief by anyone professing a
zealous Christian piety in the tenth or immediately following centuries,
the time when damage to the codex is believed to have occurred.

The world the poet appears to long for and to desire restoration of,
in authoring the poem, is materially, as well as spiritually, quite
different in many respects from the new Christian world of the
eighth century in which he lives. However, what separates him most
dramatically from his contemporaries appears to be his conviction
that a connection between the two can exist—that in restoring various
Roman arts from almost half a millennium before, especially those
of civil and other related engineering specialties, lies perhaps the
most efficacious means by which “trends toward fissiparousness
rather than unity”85 in his present world might be reversed to make
a more decent place for people to live and work in. For the poet,
the idea appears to have currency that meaningful culture resides
in an aesthetic experience, so advanced and exquisite, as to be
something approaching in likeness to a spiritual awakening. The
engineering arts and spiritual enlightenment, in other words, appear
to be inseparable, and in its highest form this combination appears to

84 While Renoir makes the point in “The Old English Ruin,” in The Old English Elegies,
150, that the poem contains no “philosophical statement,” from what has just been demon-
strated, it is safe to conclude now that such actually does occur, at least implicitly.

85 Conant, Staying Roman, 439-700, 378.
provide the opportunity to recognize divinity in the actual, expressing itself through the genius of artisans, architects, and engineers alike.

Is the poet, thus, an eighth-century Ruskin, a prophet and scourge of contemporary society? Such a suggestive identification is farfetched at the very least, but he certainly appears to anticipate something of a Ruskin in his emphasis upon the various engineering and other arts and skills mastered by the Romans as being a principal way by which the forces resulting in early-medieval British dispersive society might begin to be countered to restore a cultural wholeness insuring peace and prosperity that previously made life worth living for the Romano-British in one of the empire’s frontier system’s fortress-cities located in the northwest part of the ‘far-flung kingdom,’ the imperial province once known as Britannia.

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*Pages from Codex Exoniensis*