

Veranstalter:	Prof. Craig Davis
Thema:	Old English Poetry [AA-W]
Art der Veranstaltung:	Seminar Ib
Veranstaltungsnummer:	53-543
Zeit:	2st., Do 10-12
Raum:	Phil 701
Beginn:	7. April 2011

Kommentar zur Veranstaltung:

Over thirty thousand verses of vernacular poetry survive in a few damaged manuscripts copied around the year 1000 in Anglo-Saxon England, comprising the first extant expression of archaic Germanic tradition in song. The verse form is distinctive: a four-stress alliterative long line, breaking in the middle and designed for extemporaneous composition in oral performance, found wherever Germanic languages are first recorded from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries over an arc of territory stretching from Greenland in the west to the Crimea in the east. This ancient art was brought to the former Roman province of Britannia in the fifth and sixth centuries by migrants from northern Germany and southern Jutland, who used it to express their most serious thoughts and feelings. These poems reveal a stark, even grim fatalism about the way the world works through time, called *wyrd* 'destiny, the way things turn out', a force that can be resisted but never overcome. Nonetheless, the values celebrated in this verse are personal and warm, reflecting a strong sense of loyalty and affection in the face of the harsh exigencies of life and death. One third of the extant verses recall the ancient kings and peoples of the migration period, a partly historical but largely imagined legendary past. The most ambitious of these poems is *Beowulf*, probably the single most expressive document we possess for the cultural world of northern Europe after the fall of Rome. It tells of the last king of a lost tribe once living in southern Sweden, obliterated long since by its enemies. No one knows when, where, by whom or for whom this work was first composed during the previous half millennium—we have a better date for the poems of Homer—but it is a searching study of the origin of violence in human affairs, a meditation upon the prognosis for peace. Shorter poems, like the Old English elegies—*The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Wife's Lament*—also reflect restlessly, without final answers, on the nature and meaning of human life on earth. Contemporary events are also vividly memorialized in this poetry, like the fall of the East Saxon ealdorman Byrthnoth against Vikings in August of 991 in *The Battle of Maldon*.

Another third of Old English poetry is biblical in content, dynamic paraphrases of Genesis and Exodus and the book of Daniel, as well as one of the most powerful depictions of the Passion of Christ in *The Dream of the Rood*, where the Cross itself, as both servant and slayer of God, becomes the outspoken protagonist. Other poems recount the lives of saints and their dramatic martyrdoms, but many are more light-hearted, piquing or bawdy, like the 95 poetic riddles from the *Exeter Book*. We will also learn the 31-character Anglo-Frisian *futhorc* as it was preserved in "The Rune Poem" and used to inscribe verses on the Franks Casket and Ruthwell Cross.

Requirements for a "Schein"

Daily translation and discussion of the poems in class
 Final translation project, critical essay or research paper

Required Texts:

Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader (rev. ed. 1971) [supplied by instructor]

Sprechstunde während der Vorlesungszeit:	t.b.a.
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