Several manuscripts of Bede's *History* contain the Old English text in addition to Bede's Latin version. The poem is given here in a West Saxon form with a literal interlinear translation. In Old English spelling, æ (as in Cædmon's name and line 3) is a vowel symbol that represents the vowel of Modern English *cat*; þ (line 2) and ð (line 7) both represented the sound *th*. The spelling *sc* (line 1) = *sh*; *ġ* (line 1) = *y* in *yard*; *ċ* (line 1)=*ch* in *chin*; *c* (line 2)=*k*. The space in the middle of the line indicates the caesura. The alliterating sounds that connect the half-lines are printed in bold italics.

From An Ecclesiastical History of the English People

[THE STORY OF CÆDMON]

Heavenly grace had especially singled out a certain one of the brothers in the monastery ruled by this abbess[1] for he used to compose devout and religious songs. Whatever he learned of holy Scripture with the aid of interpreters, he quickly turned into the sweetest and most moving poetry in his own language, that is to say English. It often happened that his songs kindled a contempt for this world and a longing for the life of Heaven in the hearts of many men. Indeed, after him others among the English people tried to compose religious poetry, but no one could equal him because he was not taught the art of song by men or by human agency but received this gift through heavenly grace. Therefore, he was never able to compose any vain and idle songs but only such as dealt with religion and were proper for his religious tongue to utter. As a matter of fact, he had lived in the secular estate until he was well advanced in age without learning any songs. Therefore, at feasts, when it was decided to have a good time by taking turns singing, whenever he would see the harp getting close to his place,[2] he got up in the middle of the meal and went home.

Once when he left the feast like this, he went to the cattle shed, which he had been assigned the duty of guarding that night. And after he had stretched himself out and gone to sleep, he dreamed that someone was standing at his side and greeted him, calling out his name. "Cædmon," he said, "sing me something."

And he replied, "I don't know how to sing; that is why I left the feast to come here—because I cannot sing."

"All the same," said the one who was speaking to him, "you have to sing for me."

"What must I sing?" he said.

And he said, "Sing about the Creation."

At this, Cædmon immediately began to sing verses in praise of God the Creator, which he had never heard before and of which the sense is this:

> Nu sculon ***h***eriġean ***h***eofonriċes Weard
> Now we must praise heaven-kingdom's Guardian,
>
> ***M***eotodes ***m***eahte and his ***m***odġeþanc
> the Measurer's might and his mind-plans,

1. Abbess Hilda (614–680), a grandniece of the first Christian king of Northumbria, founded Whitby, a double house for monks and nuns, in 657 and ruled over it for twenty-two years.

2. Oral poetry was performed to the accompaniment of a harp; here the harp is being passed from one participant of the feast to another, each being expected to perform in turn.

*w*eorc *W*uldor-Fæder swa he *w*undra ġeh*w*æs
the work of the Glory-Father, when he of wonders of every one,

*e*ċe Drihten *o*r *o*nstealde
eternal Lord, the beginning established.[3]

He ærest sceop *ie*lda[4] bearnum
He first created for men's sons

*h*eofon to *h*rofe *h*aliġ Scyppend
heaven as a roof, holy Creator;

ða *m*iddanġeard *m*oncynnes Weard
then middle-earth mankind's Guardian,

*e*ċe Drihten æfter teode
eternal Lord, afterwards made—

*f*irum *f*oldan *F*rea ælmihtiġ
for men earth, Master almighty.

This is the general sense but not the exact order of the words that he sang in his sleep;[5] for it is impossible to make a literal translation, no matter how well-written, of poetry into another language without losing some of the beauty and dignity. When he woke up, he remembered everything that he had sung in his sleep, and to this he soon added, in the same poetic measure, more verses praising God.

The next morning he went to the reeve,[6] who was his foreman, and told him about the gift he had received. He was taken to the abbess and ordered to tell his dream and to recite his song to an audience of the most learned men so that they might judge what the nature of that vision was and where it came from. It was evident to all of them that he had been granted the heavenly grace of God. Then they expounded some bit of sacred story or teaching to him, and instructed him to turn it into poetry if he could. He agreed and went away. And when he came back the next morning, he gave back what had been commissioned to him in the finest verse.

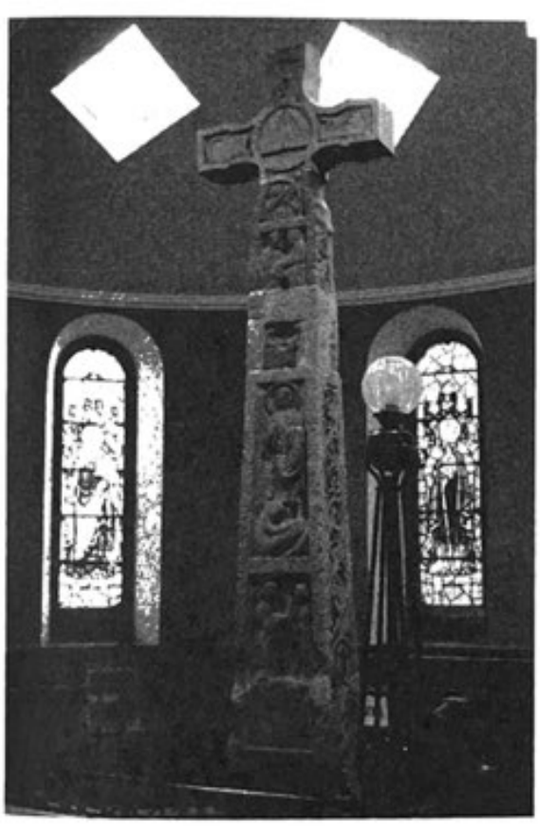
Therefore, the abbess, who cherished the grace of God in this man, instructed him to give up secular life and to take monastic vows. And when she and all those subject to her had received him into the community of brothers, she gave orders that he be taught the whole sequence of sacred history. He remembered everything that he was able to learn by listening, and turning it over in his mind like a clean beast that chews the cud,[7] he converted it into sweetest song, which sounded so delightful that he made his teachers, in their

3. I.e., established the beginning of every one of the wonders.
4. The later manuscript copies read *eorpan*, "earth," for *ælda* (West Saxon *ielda*), "men's."
5. Bede is referring to his Latin translation, for which we have substituted the Old English text with interlinear translation.
6. Superintendent of the farms belonging to the monastery.
7. In Mosaic law "clean" animals, those that may be eaten, are those that both chew the cud and have a cloven hoof (cf. Leviticus 11.3 and Deuteronomy 14.6).

turn, his listeners. He sang about the creation of the world and the origin of the human race and all the history of Genesis; about the exodus of Israel out of Egypt and entrance into the promised land; and about many other stories of sacred Scripture, about the Lord's incarnation, and his passion,[8] resurrection, and ascension into Heaven; about the advent of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of the apostles. He also made many songs about the terror of the coming judgment and the horror of the punishments of hell and the sweetness of heavenly kingdom; and a great many others besides about divine grace and justice in all of which he sought to draw men away from the love of sin and to inspire them with delight in the practice of good works.[9] * * *

8. The suffering of Christ beginning on the night of the Last Supper and culminating with his death.
9. The great majority of extant Old English poems are on religious subjects like those listed here, but most are thought to be later than Cædmon.

THE DREAM OF THE ROOD



Ruthwell Cross, Ruthwell, Scotland, ca. 8th century. Not only is the cross sculpted with Christian images; it also has lines from *The Dream of the Rood* inscribed in runic letters. They may have been added at a later date.

The Dream of the Rood (i.e., of the Cross) is considered the finest of a large number of religious poems in Anglo-Saxon. Neither the author nor its date of composition is known. It appears in a late tenth-century manuscript located in Vercelli in northern Italy, a manuscript made up of Old English religious poems and sermons. The poem may antedate its manuscript, because some passages from the Rood's speech were carved, with some variations, in runes on a stone cross at some time after its construction early in the eighth century; this is the famous Ruthwell Cross, preserved near Dumfries in southern Scotland. The precise relation of the poem to this cross is, however, uncertain.

The experience of the Rood, often called "tree" in the poem—its humiliation at the hands of those who cut it down and made it into an instrument of punishment for criminals and its humility when the young hero Christ mounts it—has a suggestive relevance to the condition of the Dreamer. His isolation and melancholy is typical of exile figures in Anglo-Saxon poetry. For the Rood, however, glory has replaced torment, and at the end, the Dreamer's description