

Anglo Saxon Riddle

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For Poeta Atlantiae
Ruby Joust VIII, AS 54

Summary

Details and citations in the following pages

- A riddle in the style of the Exeter Book (donated to Exeter Cathedral in 1072 CE - **see page 2**)
- An extended description of the form and importance of an object, which in some cases is also a challenge to guess (**see page 2**)
 - Solution is an object that would be familiar to the riddle's audience
 - Some Exeter riddles are extremely difficult to guess, with a range of possible solutions
 - Others are completely obvious, serving more as an extended description and exploration of the nature and importance of an object
- Written using compound descriptors other than kennings, which are relatively rare in the Exeter riddles (**see page 3**)
- Written in Anglo-Saxon style alliterative meter
 - Alliteration occurs between one or more heavy stresses in the first half-line and the first heavy stress of the second half-line (**see page 8**)
 - Alliterating letters are ones that begin a stressed *syllable*, and may not be the first letter of the *word* (**see page 9**)
 - In my riddle, the length and form of each half-line is based on Geoffrey Russom's word-foot theory, an alternative model of Anglo-Saxon metrics to Eduard Sievers' theory of foot types (**see page 5**)

Introduction

The Exeter Book is a collection of Anglo Saxon poetry that was given to Exeter Cathedral by Leofric, the first bishop of Exeter, in the year 1072 CE. The manuscript was likely compiled in the last decades of the 10th century.¹ In addition to moving elegies, the Exeter book contains a large number of riddles, written in the same type of alliterative verse as the elegies, *Beowulf*, and other surviving pieces of Anglo Saxon literature. The book contains 95 riddles, on mostly secular topics, believed to be written by the monastic community that produced the Exeter Book. Their authorship and inclusion in the manuscript show that riddling was a prestigious literary genre in Anglo Saxon culture.² This riddle, inspired by the Anglo Saxon riddles, is written in that same verse style, using Geoffrey Russom's word-foot theory as a guide. The solution is an object that is both well-known and meaningful to members of our Society.

Riddles as guessing games or poetic descriptions

The riddles in the Exeter Book vary in length and style, but have certain elements in common. They are all fairly short (compared to other Anglo Saxon works such as *Beowulf*, and even to some of the elegies in the Exeter Book), self-contained pieces that describe a well-known thing (usually, but not always, an inanimate object) without naming it, allowing the reader or listener to guess the subject of the riddle.

Some of the Exeter riddles are extremely difficult to guess - so much so, in fact, that scholars have not settled on a solution. For example, scholarly guesses at the solution to riddle 67 range from "the moon," to "a wandering minstrel," to "a riddle."³ These challenging "guessing-game" riddles often end in a phrase such as "*saga hwæt ic hatte*" ("say what my name is" - these riddles are often, but not always, written from the first-person POV of the object being guessed).⁴

¹ Dobbie, Elliott van Kirk and Krapp, George Philip eds. *The Exeter Book*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), ix.

² Cavell, Megan. "The Exeter Book riddles in context," The British Library, January 2018.

³ Baum, Paul F., *Anglo-Saxon Riddles of the Exeter Book*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1963.
<https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon_Riddles_of_the_Exeter_Book>

⁴ *ibid*, riddle 23.

The solutions to other Exeter riddles are obvious almost immediately. Riddle 51, for example, is one of the longer riddles, and it is obvious within the first few lines that the answer is a sword. The riddle goes on for quite a while, though, describing the sword's history and ownership, the various circumstances it finds itself in, and the effect it has on those around it. The point of this riddle seems not to be a guessing game, as from that perspective it is rather unexciting. Rather, the point seems to be a deep exploration of the nature of an object, its place in Anglo-Saxon culture, and the effect it has on its society.

This is the direction I chose to take with my riddle. I am not sure how easy or difficult it will be to guess the solution to my riddle, but I hope to guide my audience in thinking about what the object means in our society, what it stands for, and what that says about us.

kennings, or the lack thereof

One of the most recognizable features of Anglo Saxon literature (and early Germanic literature in general) is the use of kennings. Kennings are short, descriptive phrases, usually two-word compounds, that stand in place of a thing's name - essentially mini-riddles.⁵ For example, in the prologue to *Beowulf*, we find several kennings, including *hronrāde* ("whale-road") for "ocean," *liffreā* ("light-lord") for "God," and *bēaga bryttan* ("ring-giver") for "king."

It surprised me, then, how infrequently kennings appear in the Exeter riddles compared to other Anglo Saxon literature. Most riddles, in fact, contain no kennings whatsoever. On reflection, though, this makes sense. If kennings serve as mini-riddles, riddles themselves serve as extended kennings.

In keeping with the style of the majority of the Exeter riddles, I have decided not to include kennings in my riddle. I have, however, tried to include other types of descriptive compounds common to Anglo Saxon literature so that the kennings' absence might not be felt. I use a compound descriptor, "battle-brave," that is a reasonable translation of a descriptor ("*beaducafa*") found in *Wulf ond Eadwacer*, an elegy from the Exeter Book. This compound descriptor, as it appears in my riddle, is not a kenning, as it does not stand in place of a noun. A

⁵ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Kenning." In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 2016. Accessed May 21, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/art/kenning>.

kenning for “battle-brave **warriors**” might be “battle-brave **death-dealers**,” or perhaps more appropriately to our society, “battle-brave **sword-wielders**.” Either of these kennings would be a metrically valid choice, as we will explore in the next section, but would make use of a device rarely seen in Anglo Saxon riddles.

Anglo Saxon meter

On a basic level, Anglo Saxon poetry consists of two half-lines (or “verses”), each of which contains two heavily stressed syllables (or “lifts”) along with a number of weaker syllables (or “dips”).⁶ Lifts can be further subdivided into strong stresses and half stresses (for example “Mississippi” has a strong stress on 3rd syllable, and a half stress on the 1st syllable). Here, strong stresses, half stresses, and weak syllables will be represented by S, s, and x respectively.

Unlike the modern, syllabo-tonic poetry that we are accustomed to, in which discrete sets of stressed and unstressed syllables (known as “feet”) repeat in a consistent pattern,⁷ the lifts and dips in Anglo Saxon poetry occur seemingly at random. Through close examination of the texts, though, scholars have found that the verses in Anglo Saxon poetry do conform to certain sets of stress patterns.

The two predominant theories of Anglo Saxon stress patterns are Eduard Sievers’ theory of verse types, and Geoffrey Russom’s word-foot theory. Both of these theories are good descriptive models of Anglo Saxon verse, and both have their strengths and weaknesses in terms of how clearly and succinctly they capture the nature of Anglo Saxon meter. From the point of view of a poet, though, I find I prefer Russom’s word-foot theory to Sievers’ theory of verse types, as it is easier to apply, but yields a result equally faithful to the rhythm of Anglo Saxon poetry as Sievers’ model. I do not argue that either theory is inherently better or more “accurate” than the other. This is merely my own personal preference, and poets who would imitate Anglo Saxon verse should choose whichever theory they prefer. For that reason, I will describe here

⁶ Deane, Paul. “Linking Letters: A Poet’s Guide to Alliterative Verse.” 2000. Accessed May 19, 2019. <<http://alliteration.net/field6.htm>> This entire series of lessons is an excellent primer on alliterative poetry in general, and Anglo Saxon poetry in particular.

⁷ Iambic pentameter is a classic example, in which a foot of one unstressed followed by a stressed syllable (an “iamb”) repeats 5 times - (xS)(xS)(xS)(xS)(xS).

how Russom’s word-foot theory works, but I would encourage interested readers to also look into Sievers’ theory.⁸

Russom’s word-foot theory⁹

Geoffrey Russom posits that each verse (each half-line) in Anglo Saxon poetry is comprised of two poetic feet,¹⁰ and that the composition of each foot (how many syllables and their stress) corresponds to the stress pattern of a word native to Old English. This yields the following set of possible feet in Anglo Saxon poetry:

foot	Old English example word	Modern English example word
x	<i>ond</i> (and)	to (and other function words)
S	<i>gōd</i> (good)	fight
xx	<i>oppe</i> (or)	it is
Sx	<i>dryhten</i> (lord)	fighting
Ss	[□] <i>sæ-mann</i> (sailor)	list-field
Sxx	<i>bealdode</i> (he encouraged)	juniper
Ssx	[□] <i>sæ-mannes</i> (sailor’s)	list-mistress
Sxs	<i>middan-geard</i> (Middle Earth)	brigandine
Sxxs	<i>sibbe-ge-driht</i> (band of kinsmen)	juniper bush

There are a couple of necessary caveats that we must apply in order for this system to fully and accurately reflect the variety of verses we find in Anglo Saxon poetry. These caveats pertaining to the composition of feet are:

⁸ For a good description of Sievers’ model, see: Fulk, R.D. and Pope, John C. eds, “Old English Versification.” In *Eight Old English Poems* (New York: Norton, 2001), 129-158.

⁹ This description of Russom’s word-foot theory is distilled from the following article: Russom, Geoffrey. "Word and Foot in "Beowulf". " *Style* 21, no. 3 (1987): 387-99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42946213>.

¹⁰ The basic building blocks of poetic meter, usually but not always composed of at least one stressed syllable, and one or more unstressed syllables.

- 1) Function words may be, but do not have to be, excluded from the syllable count. Unfortunately, Russom does not adequately define what he means by a “function word,” but I take it to mean a small word that serves a grammatical function, such as prepositions (to, with), conjunctions (and, or), or some pronouns (that, those).
- 2) Unstressed prefixes can be treated as function words. For instance, a foot containing the word, “unlikely” could either include or exclude the first syllable, “un-,” in the syllable count.

These caveats are to be applied on an as-needed basis to make a verse conform to the pattern of a native Old English word. Therefore the “but” that begins line 10 of my poem is not included in the syllable count, while the but in the second half of the same line is. Likewise, the unstressed prefixes of “dishonor” and “injustice” in lines 12 and 13 are not counted, but combined with other words, they could be. This inconsistency may seem a frustrating cop-out, but the same inconsistency is to be found in Anglo Saxon poetry, as Russom shows. In fact, he argues fairly persuasively that modern English speakers approach function words in a similar manner. And indeed you will sometimes find them scanning beautifully, and other times find them crammed into modern song lyrics, resulting in inconsistent syllable counts. It would appear that Anglo Saxon poets used the same approach. When a syllable is not counted, it is represented by “(x).”

Russom claims that, once you have this discrete set of foot-types, their application flows naturally from an understanding of Old English morphology. Of course, most of us do not have an innate understanding of Old English morphology, so Russom lays out a few more guidelines that govern how these feet can be combined to create verses that mimic the rhythms of Old English verse.

- 1) Each verse must have exactly two feet.
- 2) Almost all verses have four metrical positions (“S,” “s,” and “x” are each one metrical position), and two stresses (ie Sx/Sx, which is the most common verse type in Anglo Saxon poetry).
 - a) Some verses may have more than four metrical positions (ie xx/Sxs).

- b) Verses with fewer than four metrical positions should be avoided (ie *x/Sx or *S/x).¹¹
- 3) One foot can contain more than one word (ie “we are linked” = Sxs), but one word cannot span more than one foot (ie *”menagerie” = x/Sxx).
 - 4) x and xx only ever occur as the first feet of a verse, and are usually balanced out by a heavy foot (ie x/Ssx, x/Sxs, x/Sxxs).
 - 5) Only one foot per verse can exceed two metrical positions (ie *Ssx/Sxxs).
 - 6) Syllables should be combined into the largest feet possible (ie “juniper bush” has to be one foot - Sxxs, and not *Sxx/S - and so cannot be its own verse).

Looking at all of these rules, it’s a wonder I chose to use this model over Sievers’ verse types, but I find the flexibility in creating my own verse types out of word-feet to be more conducive to creative poetry writing. It’s possible I’ll feel differently if I give Sievers more of a shot, but for now Russom gets the job done.

It is unlikely that an Anglo Saxon poet would have memorized all of the available feet that this system makes available, or the specific ways in which they could be combined in a verse. It makes one wonder if this theory isn’t a bit of a stretch (of course, Sievers’ types and the long list of subtypes that are necessary to fully capture the variety of Anglo Saxon verses would be just as cumbersome to memorize). But it is almost certain that the resulting rhythm was intuitively felt by those poets, based as it is on the familiar rhythms of their native words. We all have an innate sense of the rhythm and rules of our native language,¹² and I believe it is this innate sense that informed the composition of poetry in Anglo Saxon England.

Here is a copy of my riddle with the stresses and feet marked, so you can judge how successfully I applied these rules:

¹¹ An asterisk preceding something here indicates that it is wrong.

¹² As an example, in German, nouns are assigned gender (“der/die/das”) seemingly at random to a native English speaker, but gender is actually governed by a set of rules so complex that even native German speakers cannot articulate them (unless they also happen to be linguists). But when presented with a set of nonsense words that conformed to German morphological rules, and asked what gender they should have, native German speakers tended to choose the same gender. This suggests that they have internalized a complex set of rules on an intuitive level. I believe this happens in all languages, and that this is why Anglo Saxon poets composed using rhythm that is so difficult for us to summarize. The German gender study is summarized here: Mills, Anne E. *The Acquisition of Gender: A Study of English and German*. (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1986), 77.

Sxx/S S x x S I am a thing	x/Ssx x S s x that thanes covet	Sxs/S S x x S See how I bind	x/Sxx x S x x the best of them.
x/Sxs x S x s That foemen fear	x/Sxs x S x s and few will earn.	Sx/Sx S x S x S Fettered, they will	Sx/Sx x S x free the weakest.
Sxx/Sx S x x Sx Gold without glitter,	Sx/Sx S x S x gems or baubles.	(x)Sxxs/Sx (x) S x x s But he who would bow	Sxx/Sx S x S x x S x not to bondage, but power
Sx/Sx S x S x Many members	Sx/Sx S x Sx make a circle	Sx/Sx S x S x Rather wield than	Sx/Sx S x S x wear this shackle
x/Sxs x S x S For we are linked	x/Sxxs x S x x s and living as one.	Sxx/Sx S x x S x Brings to his brothers	Sx/(x)Sx S x (x) S x bane, and dishonor,
Sxs/Sx S x s S x Battle-brave warriors	x/Sxs x S x S will break themselves	Sxx/Sx S x x S x Brings to his sisters	Sx/(x)Sx S x (x) S x sorrow, injustice.
x/Sxs x S x S To earn my yoke	x/Sxxs x S x x S for years men will toil.	Sxx/Sx S x x S x Symbol of prowess?	Sxx/Sx S x x Sx Symbol of honor?
		Sxx/Sx S x x S x Symbol of service?	Sxx/Sx S x x S x Say what my name is.

Alliteration

Anglo Saxon verse does not rhyme, in the traditional sense of matching sounds at the end of lines. Rather, it alliterates. Each line of poetry contains two verses (or half-lines), and each verse contains two lifts (or stressed syllables). One or both of the lifts in the first verse must alliterate with the first lift of the second verse. The second lift of the second verse never

alliterates.¹³ So for instance, in an early draft of my poem, line 14 read, “**S**ymbol of **p**rowess?/**S**ymbol of **p**ower?” But a line of Anglo Saxon poetry would not have had two instances of alliteration in one line, so I changed it to, “**S**ymbol of prowess?/**S**ymbol of honor?”

We tend to think of alliteration as matching the letters at the beginnings of words, but in this case we are matching the the beginning of stressed *syllables*. Thus, alliterating sounds could appear in the middle of a word - for example, “**b**elow the **b**elt” does not alliterate according to the rules of Anglo Saxon alliteration, because “l” does not alliterate with “b.” “**A**bove the **b**elt” does alliterate. Or, from Exeter riddle 11, “*þōn he ge**bol**gen/**bid**steal giefed.*”¹⁴

For the most part, sounds should match in order to alliterate, as in the above examples. Exceptions are:

- 1) All vowels alliterate with all other vowels, for example, “*beoð **e**agan mīn/**o**festum betyned.*”¹⁵
- 2) C can be pronounced “k” or “ch,” depending on the word, but always alliterates with itself, for example, “*heardan **c**ēape/hæð**c**ynne wearð.*”¹⁶
- 3) G can be pronounced “g” or “y,” depending on the word, but always alliterates with itself, for example, “*gomban **g**yltan/þæt wæs **g**ōd cyning.*”¹⁷
- 4) S alliterates with “s,” but not with “sp,” “st,” “sk,” or “sh.” “Sp” alliterates with “sp,” “st” with “st,” etc. Other consonant clusters are not so picky (so, for example, “**p**rowess” would alliterate with “**p**ower”).¹⁸

¹³ O’Donnell, Daniel Paul. “Old English Meter: A Brief Guide.”
<<http://people.uleth.ca/~daniel.odonnell/Tutorials/old-english-metre-a-brief-guide>>

¹⁴ Baum, *Anglo-Saxon Riddles of the Exeter Book*. riddle 11.

¹⁵ *ibid*, also riddle 11.

¹⁶ From *Beowulf*, line 2482.

¹⁷ *ibid*, line 11.

¹⁸ O’Donnell, “Old English Meter: A Brief Guide.”

Example - Exeter Riddle 67

*Ic eom Indryhten eorlum cuð
reste oft ricum heanū
folcū gefræge fereð wide
me fremdes ær freondum stondeð
hipeandra hyht gif ic habban sceal
blæd in burgum oþþe beorhtne god
nu snottre men swiþast lufiaþ
midwist mine Ic monigum sceal
wisdom cyþan no þær word sprecað
ænig ofer eorðan þeah nu ælda bearn
londbuendra lastas mine
swiþe secað ic swaþe hwilum
mine bemipe monna gehwylcum*

I am a lordly, thing known to nobles,
and often I rest, famous among peoples,
the mighty and the lowly; I travel widely
and to me first a stranger remains to my friends
the delight of plunderers, if I am to have
success in the cities or bright reward.
Now wise men exceedingly love
my presence. To many I shall
declare wisdom. There they speak not,
none the world over. Though now the sons of men
who live on the earth eagerly seek
the tracks that I make. I sometimes conceal
those paths of mine from all mankind.