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THE RUIN

A NEW TRANSLATION

By Margot Lamy

ORIGINAL TEXT

Wrætlic is þes wealstan, wyrde gebræcon;
 burgstede burston, broснаð enta geweorc.
 Hrofas sind gehrorene, hreorge torras,
 hrungat berofen, hrim on lime,
 5 scarde scurbeorge scorene, gedrorene,
 ældo undereotone. Eorðgrap hafað
 waldend wyrhtan forweorone, geleorene,
 heardgripe hrusan, oþ hund cnea
 werþeoda gewitan. Oft þæs wag gebad
 10 ræghar ond readfah rice æfter oþrum,
 ofstonden under stormum; steap gear gedreas.
 Wonað giet se [.....] num geheapen,
 fel on [.....]
 grimme gegrunnen [.....]
 15 ] scan heo [.....]
 ] g orþonc ærscaft [.....]
 ] g [...] lamrindum beag
 mod mo [.....] yne swiftne gebrægd
 hwætred in hringas, hygerof gebond

THE TRANSLATION

Wondrous is this wall-stone¹, fractured by fate;
 the city has crumbled², the work of giants withers.
 Rooftops in ruin³, watch-towers wasted,
 the spoke-gate⁴ despoiled, hoarfrost on mortar,
 a shelter from storms⁵ cleft and cracked⁶,
 eroded⁷ with age. Earth's embrace envelops⁸
 the master-crafters⁹ forgotten¹⁰, lost to
 the grave¹¹ grip of the soil, until a hundred generations
 of people have passed. Much¹² its¹³ wall weathered,
 lichen-grey and red-stained¹⁴, reign after reign,¹⁵
 stood steadfast through storms; lofty and high,
 yet it fell¹⁸. Still this remains:¹⁹
 age-old creation, bowed in the earth.²⁰
 Swift²¹ the stout-hearted bound firmly in fetters,

20 weallwalan wirum wundrum togædre.
 Beorht wæron burgræced, burnsele monige,
 heah horngestreon, heresweg micel,
 meodoheall monig ƿdreama full,
 oppæt þæt onwende wyrd seo swiþe.
 25 Crungon walo wide, cwoman woldagas,
 swylt eall fornorn secgrofra wera;
 wurdon hyra wigsteal westen staþolas,
 brosnade burgsteall. Betend crungon
 hergas to hrusan. Forþon þas hofu dreorgiað,
 30 ond þæs teaforgeapa tigelum sceadeð
 hrostbeages hrof. Hryre wong gecong
 gebrocen to beorgum, þær iu beorn monig
 glædmod ond goldbeorht gleoma gefrætwed,
 wlonc ond wingal wighyrstum scan;
 35 seah on sinc, on sylfor, on searogimmas,
 on ead, on æht, on eorcanstan,
 on þas beorhtan burg bradan rices.
 Stanhofu stodan, stream hate wearp
 widan wylme; weal eall befeng
 40 beorhtan bosme, þær þa baþu wæron,
 hat on hrepre. Þæt wæs hyðelic.
 Leton þonne geotan [.....]
 ofer harne stan hate streamas
 un [.....]
 45 ...] þþæt hringmere hate [.....]
 [.....] þær þa baþu wæron.
 þonne is [.....]
 [.....] re; þæt is cynelic þing,
 huse [.....] burg [.....]

foundations in wire, weaved wondrously together.²²
 Bright was that citadel with bath-halls abundant,²³
 tall gilded gables²⁴ and the great road of hosts,
 many mead-halls in days²⁵ filled with mirth,
 until the forces of fate finished it²⁶. Far and wide
 men fought and fell²⁷, days of death came
 and destroyed every valiant man;²⁹
 their rampart's foundations are ravaged,
 their fortress is fallen³⁰. The stewards perished;³¹
 temples sank³² into soil. So these halls grew dreary
 their scarlet tiles³³ shattered, shed³⁴ from the arches
 of the wood-ringed³⁵ dome.³⁶ That realm fell into ruin,
 reduced to rubble³⁷, where once many men
 joyous and gold-bright, adorned in splendor,
 wondrous and wine-flushed in war-gems shone;
 seen³⁸ in silver and gold³⁹ and in curious jewels,
 in fortune and wealth⁴⁰ and in precious stones,
 in that far-reaching realm's radiant city.
 Where⁴¹ stone-halls stood, a stream hotly gushed
 in a wide welling⁴², the wall enfolding all
 in its bright bosom, where those baths were,
 heated in the heart⁴³. That was befitting.
 Then let it pour forth,
 hot streams over hoary stone.

That is a kingly thing.⁴⁴

- ¹ *wrætlíc is þes wealstan*: comparative translations have an overwhelming tendency to render the subject into a plural (“these wall-stones”); an understandable notion, considering wall-stones are seldom found alone. However, the original composition clearly indicates a singular subject.
- ² *burgstede burston*: literally “(the) city crumbled”; I have inserted “has” for rhythmic purposes.
- ³ *brofas sind gehrorene*: literally “roofs are ruined”; this small aesthetic amendment preserves the original sense of the passage.
- ⁴ *brungear*: *Hrung* may refer to a spoke, bar, or rung. This compound has been divisive among scholars, in part because of erroneous early transcriptions. Newton has “fortress-gate” and Hostetter has “barred-gate”, while Williamson opts for “gate-locks”. Kershaw amazingly avoids translating it altogether. Based on its frequent appearance in other compounds, Klinck speculates that *hrung* might actually read *bring* (“ring”).
- ⁵ *scurbeorge*: a hapax that appears only once in the Old English corpus, it literally means “storm-protection” or “storm-shelter”. Other translations have interpreted this compound as a figurative expression for roof or a metonym for building. I have opted for a translation that hews closer to the original sense, effectively reversing the original compound and adding a preposition to maintain flow.
- ⁶ I have omitted *scearde* (“hewn, broken, notched”) from this translation, as two other phrases in the passage convey a similar meaning: *scorene* (“hewn, cleft, split”) and to a lesser extent *gedrorene* (“cracked, crumbled, weakened, fallen”), which I interpret as further description of the storm-shelter in line 5a.
- ⁷ *undereotone*: literally “eaten underneath”, a metaphorical expression for earth’s natural erosion processes.
- ⁸ *eorþgræp hafað*: literally “earth’s grip holds”. I have extended the more figurative expression “earth’s embrace”, suggested by J.R. Clark Hall’s Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, with the verb “envelop”.
- ⁹ *waldend wyrhtan*: Leslie and Klinck both suggest this is a compound, which is echoed in the translations of Newton (“master-masons”), Williamson (“master-builders”) and Hostetter (“master-crafters”).
- ¹⁰ *forweorone*: literally “faded” or “withered”, suggesting “forgotten”, a descriptor more suitable for flesh-and-blood humans.
- ¹¹ *beardgripe*: I have chosen the evocative synonym “grave” for heard (meaning “stern, severe, cruel”), conveying a double meaning fitting for the poem’s subject matter.
- ¹² *oft*: the original adverb denotes frequency, while the sequence of words suggests conditions or events, making “much” a more fitting choice than the literal “often” for this segment.
- ¹³ *þæs wag gebað*: the genitive singular pronoun (*þæs*) in this line refers to the city; that is, the ruin itself.
- ¹⁴ *readfab*: the referent for this compound, which refers to a staining or mottling of red, has been debated among scholars. The interpretation that this refers to iron oxide, as reflected in the translation of Hostetter, is met with disagreement by Kershaw, who believes it to be the red plaster lining the bath’s inner walls. Leslie refutes Kershaw’s theory on the grounds that the poet is describing the outer walls in this section, and that *fab* does not evoke the uniformity of polished plaster. Instead, Leslie explicitly links *readfab* with *rægbar*, proposing that it refers to orange-tinted lichens. I have purposely left the translation ambiguous for this reason.
- ¹⁵ *rice after oprum*: literally “reign after others”.
- ¹⁶ *ofstonden under*: literally “persisted” or “endured”, here rendered “stood steadfast”, wherein the modifying adverb preserves the intensity of meaning.
- ¹⁷ *under*: “through” better reflects modern usage.
- ¹⁸ The addition of “yet” emphasizes the contrasting states between the previous descriptions (lofty, high, steadfast) and the ultimate fate (fallen). Likewise, I have added “it” to give the segment a clear subject.
- ¹⁹ *wonað*: I have taken this verb to be an unusual form of *wunian*, “to remain”, based on the Dobbie-Krapp transcription. The expected form would be *wunað*. As Klinck notes, the middle consonant is unclear in the original manuscript, causing some to transcribe the verb as *worað* (from *worian*), meaning “to moulder, decay.” The *wunian* transliteration, and thus the “remain” translation, is supported by the analysis of Klinck, based on the context of the section. Additionally, she notes a similar confusion between *wonað* and *wunað* that occurs in reverse in “The Phoenix.”
- ²⁰ *lamrindum*: literally “in the earth’s crust”. I have opted to pass over lines 12b through 16a, as they are too fragmented to draw meaning from with any accuracy. I have joined the fragmentary lines 16b (*ærsceaft*) and 17b (*lamrindum beag*) into a phrase; while these segments are not connected directly, they provide a suitable transition to the next part of the poem.

- ²¹ "Swift" here is used as an adverb.
- ²² The organization of lines 18-20 have been significantly altered from the original for both clarity and composition while maintaining the sense of the original. As the subjects of the passage, the stout-hearted are introduced earlier than in the manuscript, and have been rendered as a plural based on inference (as the construction of a wall would take more than a single person). The act of weaving (*gebrægd*) first mentioned in 18b has been relocated, now functioning as a past participle in parallel with "weaved wonderously together."
- ²³ *burnsele monige*: literally "many bath-halls".
- ²⁴ *heab horngestron*: literally "tall pinnacle-treasure" (pinnacle meaning a projection from a roof). A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary gives "wealth of the pinnacles" as a translation; the compound seems to refer to fancy roofs, perhaps bedecked with jewels (as many things are in Anglo-Saxon poetry) or intricately carved. Although *streon* is singular, I have opted to render it as a plural, reflecting the broad description of the cityscape in the description.
- ²⁵ The rune for "day" appears in the transliteration of the poem. While other translations seem to ignore it altogether, I have integrated it into the composition.
- ²⁶ *wyrd seo swiþe*: in this context, *seo swiþe* is an epithet or descriptive title for *wyrd*. The meaning of *swiþ* is twofold; it denotes power and might, but also severity or violence. I have rendered this phrase "forces of fate", which clearly captures the duality of the word, as "force" implies both a show of strength and irresistible violence against its target.
- ²⁷ *crungon walo wide*: literally "fell/died (in) battle widely"; following other translations, I integrated a subject (many men), revising the structure of the passage while maintaining the meaning of falling in battle.
- ²⁸ *woldagas*: literally "days of pestilence" or "days of mortality".
- ²⁹ *segroftra wera*: literally "sword-brave men". There is no mention of how many, but a lot—if not all—is implied. This sense is preserved with "but every valiant man".
- ³⁰ *brosnade burgsteall*: literally "the fortress fell".
- ³¹ *betend*: this word, derived from the verb *betan*, refers to one who could rebuild, restore, or reclaim the past splendor of the city; I have chosen the word steward to describe these lost care-takers.
- ³² I have added "sank" to this phrase, as no verb is present in the original poem and it appeared disparate from the previous segment.
- ³³ *teaforgeapa*: there is some debate as to whether this compound is a noun or an adjective; I have chosen to interpret it as a noun.
- ³⁴ *sceadeþ*: this word holds the meanings of both "shed" and "scattered"; in restructuring this troublesome passage, I was able to include both senses of the word, which aptly describe the fate of the tiles.
- ³⁵ *hrostbeages*: the compound *hrostbeag* literally translates to "wooden-roost-ring". Bosworth-Toller provides the gloss "the woodwork of a circular roof."
- ³⁶ Lines 29-31a proved to be a difficult section, requiring similar restructuring similar to lines 18-20. Literally, it may be parsed as "its red arch of tiles shed/wood-rings' roof". In my translation I have taken *hrostbeages hrof* as the nominative, understanding that the domed (circular) roof is from where the red tiles (of the red arch) fall. In such a reading, the referent of *þæs* in line 30 would naturally be the dome.
- ³⁷ *gebrocen to beorgum*: literally "broke into mounds, pieces".
- ³⁸ *seab*: I have interpreted this word as referring to the men and their treasures, who could be looked upon in the glory days of the city.
- ³⁹ *on sinc, on sylfor*: the order of these two words have been reversed for the sake of rhythm; conjunctions have been added.
- ⁴⁰ *on ead, on æht*: I have omitted the second *on* ("in") in the first section of this line as well as the parallel phrase in the previous line (*on sinc, on sylfor*) for rhythmic purposes. The second noun is simply integrated into the first prepositional phrase, and no meaning is lost.
- ⁴¹ I have added "where" at the beginning of this segment to indicate a shift in location.
- ⁴² Punctuation has been added to this line to more clearly delineate the phrase.
- ⁴³ *bat on breþre*: literally "hot in the heart". I have taken a cue from Hostetter's translation by referencing the source of the heat for the baths.
- ⁴⁴ As in the previous damaged section of the manuscript, I have chosen to omit lines 44-47 and 49, for they are too fragmented to draw a meaningful translation from. Although comprehensible, the fragmentary line 46 is identical to 40 and adds nothing new to the poem without the missing context. The last discernable phrase in the poem is a suitable conclusion to the elegy for the ruin: "that is a kingly thing."

ANALYSIS

Scholars often remark that “The Ruin” is, itself, a ruin. The last of the elegies in the Exeter Book, the poem suffers from a burn that penetrates the manuscript pages. The damage, apparently caused by a fallen brand, destroyed fourteen of the poem’s forty-nine lines, rendering them unreadable. Michael Swanton takes the stance that “the ruined state of the poem, far from obstructing our appreciation of it, only corroborates the truth it imports.” However, the poem’s antiquity and missing lines leave scholars to guess at the writer’s intended message, as well as the inspiration for the work.

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Speculation on the location of the eponymous ruin has long been the dominant theme in scholarly analysis. Countless tracts and essays have been written arguing that the ruin represents Bath, Chester, Hadrian’s Wall, an allegorical Babylon vanquished by the Christian God, or a fictional location existing only in the poet’s imagination. Although a consensus will likely never be reached, the city of Bath enjoys the widest support among scholars as the site described in the poem. “There are [...] three features which, taken in conjunction, fit Bath but no other site in Britain,” writes R.F. Leslie, a proponent of the theory. He names three key identifiers that point toward Bath: the thermal spring rising

into a walled reservoir, the extent of the baths (*burn-sele monige*), and the circular pool (*bringmere*). The theory is further supported by the fact that Bath is the only place in Great Britain boasting natural hot springs; other proposed sites artificially heated water using hypocausts. The Bath hypothesis also addresses the matter of time. By the eighth century, when the poem was likely written, Roman Bath had long fallen into a state of decay, having probably been derelict by the fifth century.

Other scholars, most notably Hugh T. Keenan, have proposed allegorical readings that envision the subject as a symbolic Babylon. Pointing to Cynewulf’s account of the apocalypse in *Christ II*, Keenan sees the poem as an “ironic and scornful allegory” that portrays a sinful pagan city, rightfully levelled by the Christian God in an act of punishment. While a Christian reading of “The Ruin” may not be entirely unwarranted considering the Exeter Book’s religious content, this interpretation has been criticized for imposing ham-fisted moralism onto the text. James Doubleday faults Keenan for forcing a connection between Babylon and the poem while ignoring the poet’s celebratory tone and genuine admiration for the city and its people. Most damningly, the poem lacks the references to a protective personal God that would be expected of a Christian text.

Finally, there are those who argue that “The Ruin” might not represent a specific location at all, but rather a generalized imagining of a great civilization fallen into decay. Anne Thompson Lee argues that “the actual location of the poem is at best peripheral to our understanding of it.” Lee criticizes popular approaches to the poem for treating it as an archeological riddle while neglecting its more literary aspects.

"The Ruin" has been described as a poem of contrasts: between past and present, between humanity and its works, between the ephemeral and the enduring, between the living city and the ruin. The juxtaposition of these key ideas is built into the very structure of the poem, a non-linear journey that moves between an implied present gaze and the poet's imaginative reconstruction of the city in its prime. Observations of the present are brought into contrast with the past, a rapidly alternating pattern established within the first lines of the poem. This irregular approach results in a contemplative yet animated experience, produced by a narrative that circulates through both time and space.

"The Ruin" reverses structural expectations from the start with atypically abrupt changes in tense and mood: "*Wrætlic is þes wealstan, wyrde gebræcon; / burgstede burston, brosnad enta geweorc.*" This pattern of temporal-emotional contrasts continues throughout the poem. "Each contrasting scene builds upon the initial paradigm, so that the concepts found there are transformed into vivid realities, which in turn add to the impact of these concepts," explains Alain Renoir. The contrasting images direct the reader's attention between the ruin in its present state and its past as a living settlement, contrasting scenes of life and decay, of sorrow and of joy.

The poet's chief concern lies not with buildings alone, but also with the people who made them. As the poet admires the structures, they also draw attention to those who raised their roofs and walked their halls. The reader is invited to appreciate the ingenuity of the master builders (6b-7), reflect on the passage of generations (8b-9a), and imagine a celebration at the mead-hall (23), drawing attention to the human joy that once filled the ruined city. By closely identifying men with their creations, the people become an aspect of the ruin itself.

Alain Renoir identifies a deliberate contrast between the language of destruction and that of the ruin's former opulence. Destructive action is almost always conveyed with single words, while descriptions of grandeur and majesty are expressed using elaborate phrases or compounds. This distinction, says Renoir, conveys negative action with a more immediate, forceful impact, while depictions of splendor are experienced less hurriedly, offering a more reflective mood. Daniel Calder has likewise observed the impact of downward motion in the poem, which animates the force behind its most potent images. Through varying syntax and selective use of active and passive words, the poet animates the setting and offers a more dynamic experience.

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The sense of irreversible loss that permeates “The Ruin” has prompted critics to assess it as a reflection on transience, a metaphor for the fleetingness of humanity, creation, and the world itself. The poem has been cited as an exemplary illustration of *sic transit gloria mundi*, or “thus passes the glory of the world,” a Latin phrase signifying the mutability of earthly things. The poet’s use of *wyrd*, fate or destiny, implies the ruin’s destruction is no accident, but rather the inevitable outcome of all human endeavors. The interpretation of “The Ruin” as a reflection on the ephemeral nature of man and his works remains an enduring critical assessment of the poem. Dailey, for instance, calls “The Ruin” “a poetic meditation on the patterning and effects of time on materiality,” as does Renoir, who writes that the poem’s language reflects “the fateful fragility of human accomplishments at their peak.”

While this interpretation is well-supported by the text, others have taken an alternative approach to the poem’s reflection on time and decay. Lawrence Beaston identifies resilience, rather than transience, as the poem’s chief theme, writing that “The Ruin” “insists not so much on the mutability of the earthly world,” but rather the brevity of human life in contrast to their works. The city may have crumbled and fallen to the forces of fate, yet still it remains; its people may be long gone, but a monument to their memory still stands. The speaker’s encounter itself is testament to the lastingness of human works and their ability to transcend the lifespan of their makers.

The poem reflects a philosophical idea deeply ingrained in the worldview of the Anglo-Saxons, says Beaston: that the legacy left by one’s deeds could be used to escape the inevitable oblivion of death. Material works such as the baths of “The Ruin” leave the most enduring mark upon the physical world, but words too have the power to prolong the memory of those who came before. “Even the intangible stories and songs of the *scops* have more staying power than the human beings whose lives they recall,” explains Beaston, noting that “the best way that an individual person can escape *wyrd*’s brutal hand is to achieve some fleeting moments of glory, as Beowulf did, that will be commemorated in story and song.”

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