

In Search of Lost Time:
Aldhelm and *The Ruin*

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The Ruin – which it is almost traditional to describe as a ruin itself, as bad fire damage has obliterated large parts of the text in the Exeter Book – is a meditation on that most Anglo-Saxon of preoccupations: the transitoriness of worldly glory.¹ It takes the form of an extended description of an urban scene which alternates between the physical decay which confronts the poet in the present and an imagining, inspired by this vision, of what the city must have been like in the past. It is a poem of contrasts: between then and now, between a living city and a ruined shell, between the city as a collection of buildings and the city as a body of people with a corporate life. These contrasts serve to build up a unique sense of lost time, for not only does the author of *The Ruin* construct his own conception of the past, but he does so by examining the past constructions of other people.

In this paper I shall argue that, whether or not it is a description of an actual location – which most scholars take to be the Roman city of Bath, owing to the reference to hot streams in lines 43 and 46² –

¹ See C. E. Fell, 'Perceptions of Transience', *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. M. Godden and M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 172–89.

² K. P. Wentersdorf, 'Observations on *The Ruin*', *MÆ* 46 (1977), 171–80, offers

The Ruin is itself a construction, an edifice of literary building-blocks which have been quarried from the works of past authors.³ In particular, I shall examine the possible role of Latin tradition in the formation of the *Ruin*-poet's vision of the past and his poetic sensibility.

I think this approach may be helpful, as *The Ruin*'s peculiarities of theme and style have not successfully been explained by purely vernacular referents: although it is true that *The Ruin* shares an elegiac mood with the other texts from the Exeter Book which have been designated as elegies, there are also important differences between this group and *The Ruin*.⁴ *The Ruin* does not make use of *ectopoeia*, the

the fullest exposition of the compelling archaeological evidence in favour of Bath; this conclusion was first reached in the nineteenth century by H. Leo, *Carmen Anglo-Saxonicum in Codice Exoniensis servatum, quod vulgo inscribitur 'Ruinae'* (Halle, 1865), and J. Earle, 'An Ancient Saxon Poem of a City in Ruins, supposed to be Bath', *Proc. of the Bath Nat. Hist. and Antiquities Field Club* 2 (1870–3), 259–70; alternative suggestions have since been made by G. W. Dunleavy, 'A "De Excidio" Tradition in the Old English *Ruin*?', *PQ* 38 (1959), 112–18, who favours Chester, and S. J. Herben, '*The Ruin*', *Modern Language Notes* 54 (1939), 37–9, who suggests Hadrian's wall. Critics have also argued against *The Ruin* being a description of a specific location: see H. T. Keenan, '*The Ruin* as Babylon', *Tennessee Stud. In Lit.* 11 (1966), 109–17; A. T. Lee, '*The Ruin*: Bath or Babylon? A Non-archaeological Investigation', *NM* 74 (1973), 443–55; and W. Johnson, '*The Ruin* as Body–City Riddle', *PQ* 59 (1980), 397–411.

³ For the purposes of argument I accept here the traditional eighth-century dating of *The Ruin* given by R. F. Leslie, *Three Old English Elegies* (Manchester, 1961), p. 35, although there has been no consensus on this matter.

⁴ The genre distinction is a problematic one: on this see J. Harris, 'Elegy in Old English and Old Norse: a Problem in Literary History', *The Old English Elegies: New Essays in Criticism and Research*, ed. M. Green (Cranbury, NJ, 1983), pp. 46–56. The corpus of Exeter Book poems traditionally regarded as elegies consists of *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Riming Poem*, *Deor*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wife's*

trope of speaking through an imagined person, and it does not constitute a lament.⁵ Whereas the other elegies tend towards thoughts of consolation at the end, *The Ruin* – although the final section is so badly damaged that it is hard to say for sure – continues merely to describe the past life of the imagined inhabitants of the city. It features one of the most potent images of the Anglo-Saxon elegy – the remains of a past civilization crumbling under the inescapable pressure of fate (made explicit in *The Ruin* in line 24: *oppæt þæt onwende nyrd seo swiþe*)⁶ – but, while *The Wanderer*, probably the *locus classicus* of this motif, relates this general decay to the *eardstapa*'s personal lament for his own vanished way of life, *The Ruin* takes this image and expands it with unparalleled detail of the remains themselves, making the overall tone of the poem – in the words of R. F. Leslie – ‘an imaginative nostalgia for a glorious past, stimulated by a particular scene spread out before the poet’s eyes’.⁷ The overall theme, much more so than in the personal elegies, is simply *sic transit gloria mundi*.

A model for this type of text can be found in variants upon the *encomium urbis* theme: there are abundant late Latin examples of poems in praise of a city which, like *The Ruin*, describe in great detail

Lament, Resignation, The Husband’s Message and *The Ruin*. See the discussion of elegy as a classification, rather than as a genre per se, in A. L. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: an Edition and Genre Study* (Montreal, 1992), pp. 13–14.

⁵ The classic definition of the characteristics of Old English ‘elegy’ is that of Greenfield: ‘a relatively short reflective or dramatic poem embodying a contrasting pattern of loss and consolation, ostensibly based upon a specific personal experience or observation, and expressing an attitude towards that experience’. S. B. Greenfield, ‘The Old English Elegies’, *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature*, ed. E. G. Stanley (London, 1966), pp. 142–75, at 143.

⁶ See B. J. Timmer, ‘Wyrð in Anglo-Saxon Prose and Poetry’, *Neophilologus* 26 (1941), 24–33 and 213–28. *The Ruin* is quoted from ASPR III, 227–9.

⁷ Leslie, *Three Old English Elegies*, p. 3.

the city's architectural features and often the lives of its inhabitants.⁸ This genre, which was codified in the works of Menander the Rhetorician around 300, was described in the eighth century in a rhetorical tract:⁹

Urbium laudem primum conditoris dignitas ornat idque aut ad homines inlustres pertinet aut etiam ad deos, ut Athenas a Minerva dicitur constitutas: et ne fabulosa potius quam vera videantur. Secundus est de specie moenium locus et situs, qui aut terrenus est aut maritimus et in monte vel in plano: tertius de fecunditate agrorum, largite fontium, moribus incolarum: tum de his ornamentis, quae postea accesserint, aut felicitate, si res sponte ortae sint et prolatae aut virtute et armis et bello propagatae. Laudamus etiam illud, si ea civitas habuerit plurimos nobiles viros, quorum gloria lucem praebeat universis.¹⁰

The city described in *The Ruin* is praised in similar terms: the walls are mentioned in the first line, where they are described as *wratlic* 'wondrous', even though *nyrd* 'fate' has shattered them. Other

⁸ See P. Zanna, "Descriptiones urbium" and Elegy in Latin and Vernaculars in the Early Middle Ages. At the Crossroads between Civic Engagement, Artistic Enthusiasm and Religious Meditation', *SM* 3rd ser. 32 (1991), 523–96.

⁹ Now Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Latin 7530, which contains a number of miscellaneous excerpts from rhetorical texts.

¹⁰ *Rhetores Latini Minores*, ed. K. F. Halm (Leipzig, 1863), p. 587. 'The founder's dignity furnishes the first praise of cities, and it pertains to famous men or even to gods, as Athens is said to have been founded by Minerva: and these things should not seem to be fabulous, but rather true. The second relates to the appearance of the walls and the location of the site, which is either inland or coastal, in the mountains or on a plain; the third relates to the fertility of the fields, the abundance of springs, the customs of the inhabitants: then, about the distinctions which they might have later acquired, either by good fortune (if these things came about and increased by themselves), or were augmented by prowess in arms and war. And if this city had many noble men, whose glory furnished light to everyone, that we praise likewise.'

architectural features – roofs, arches, gates – are described, which would also fall into the ‘second praise’ of the city.

The customs of the departed troops of men may have a particularly Germanic ring to them in *The Ruin*, with its description of *meodoheall monig mondreama full* ‘many a mead-hall, filled with the joys of men’ (line 23), but it fits the pattern of the encomium. We know that the inhabitants of the city were a martial people, and a noble people: they wear armour as, proud and flushed with wine, they look upon treasure, silver, on costly stones, on wealth, on property, on this precious jewel, this bright city in this broad kingdom (32b–38). Even after long years of decay, it is this impression of glory which comes to captivate the author of *The Ruin*.

There is no evidence that the works of Menander the Rhetorician or the eighth-century Frankish text quoted above were known in Anglo-Saxon England, and yet the *encomium urbis* was a genre of which the Anglo-Saxons were certainly aware.¹¹ The late Old English poem *Durham*, for example, is a neat exposition of the rhetorical device in an English context: it briefly describes Durham’s location, dwelling once again upon the waterways in the vicinity, and specifying that there are stone constructions in the city. The main concern of the *Durham*-poet is the town’s ecclesiastical glory, and so the description of the bishops and holy men of Northumbria dominates the bulk of the poem; but it is the town, specifically, which is ‘extolled throughout Britain’:

Is ðeos burch breome geond Breotenrice,
steppa gestaðolad, stanas ymbutan
wundrum gewæxen. Weor ymbeornad,
ea yðum stronge, and ðer inne wunað
feola fisca kyn on floda gemonge.

¹¹ See M. Schlauch, ‘An Old English “Encomium Urbis”’, *JEGP* 40 (1941), 14–28.

And ðær gewexen is wudafæstern micel;
wuniad in ðem wycum wilda deor monige,
in deope dalum deora ungerim.
Is in ðere byri eac bearnum gecyðed
ðe arfesta eadig Cudberch
and ðes clene cyninges heafud,
Osualdes, Engle leo, and Aidan biscop,
Eadberch and Eadfrið, æðele geferes.
Is ðer inne midd heom Æðelwold biscop
and breoma bocera Beda, and Boisil abbot,
ðe clene Cudberte on gecheðe
lerde lustum, and he his lara wel genom.
Eardiað æt ðem eadige in in ðem minstre
unarimeda reliquia,
ðær monia wundrum gewurðað, ðes ðe writ seggeð,
midd ðene drihnes wer domes bideð.¹²

The Ruin and *Durham* appear to form a distinct sub-group of Old English poetry with an urban setting. In Anglo-Latin, Alcuin's *Versus de patribus, regibus et sanctis Euboricensis ecclesiae* comes close to fitting the paradigm, although it is only in one short passage near the beginning that the physical attributes of the city are described:

¹² ASPR VI, 27. 'This town is extolled throughout Britain, established on high, with stones around it, wonderfully grown up. The Wear surrounds it, a river strong with waves, and therein dwell many sorts of fish, many in the flood. And there is grown up a great forest: many a wild animal lives in its lair, in the deep dales there are many beasts. Also in this town, well-known to men, steadfast in grace, the blessed Cuthbert; and the head of Oswald, the holy king, lion of England; and bishop Aidan, and Eadberh and Eardfrith, his noble companions. Bishop Æthelwold is there with them, and the famous scholar Bede, and Boisil the abbot, who taught the holy Cuthbert in friendship, and he took his teaching well. In the minster are buried countless relics of the blessed; there many wonders come about, as writings relate, while God's company await the Judgement Day.'

Mecum ferte pedes, vestris componite carmen
hoc precibus: patriae quoniam mens dicere laudes,
et veteres cunas properat proferre parumper
Euboricae gratis praeclarae versibus urbis!
Hanc Romana manus muris et turribus altam
fundavit primo, comites sociosque laborum
indigenas tantum gentes adhibendo Britannas
nam tunc Romanos fecunda Britannia reges
sustinuit merito, mundi qui sceptrum regebant.¹³ (15–23)

The correspondences in theme and imagery between Alcuin's poem and *Durham* are striking; it is worth noting that, in these two texts, as well as in *The Ruin*, it is only stone-built, Roman cities, which are lauded. Native Anglo-Saxon habitations, built in wood, do not seem to have attracted the attentions of such poets.¹⁴

The remains of the city in *The Ruin* are stone, but they have crumbled all the same, and so this poem is not such a straightforward exposition of a city's good points: it takes the eulogistic rhetoric of the encomium and applies it to a vision of a destroyed settlement and its vanished inhabitants. The overall mood might thus be said to resemble that of the *de excidio*,¹⁵ a type of text, if not a recognizable

¹³ Alcuin: *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. P. Godman (Oxford, 1982), p. 4. 'Walk with me, compose this song with your prayers: for my mind hastens to speak praises of our homeland, and quickly to proclaim in pleasant verses the ancient origins of the most renowned city of York. This high city a Roman hand first founded with walls and towers, bringing as companions and partners in these works only the native British people: for fertile Britain then rightly supported Roman rulers, who reigned over all the earth.'

¹⁴ R. I. Page, *Anglo-Saxon Aptitudes* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 22–4, notes that Anglo-Saxon ruins could themselves be imposing, but this does not seem to have prompted poetic endeavour in the same way that Roman remains did.

¹⁵ Zanna, "'Descriptiones urbium'", p. 524, offers a definition of a sub-genre of *elegiae urbium*, which he sees as a 'meditative reflection on the fated downfall of great cities, their present and future state'.

genre, which was well known in Anglo-Saxon England as a result of Gildas's polemical *De excidio Britanniae*.¹⁶ But a closer parallel to *The Ruin* is offered by a sixth-century Latin work on the decay of a civilization, Venantius Fortunatus's *De excidio Thuringiae*. In particular, the opening of this poem, with its emphasis on fate as the agent of destruction, and its dwelling on the architectural features of the city, seems to encapsulate the mood of the first half of *The Ruin*.

Conditio belli tristis, sors invida rerum!
quam subito lapsu regna superba cadunt!
quae steterant longo felicia culmina tractu
victa sub ingenti clade cremata iacent.
aula palatino quae floruit antea cultu,
hanc modo pro cameris maesta favilla tegit.
ardua quae rutilo nituere ornata metallo,
pallidus oppressit fulgida tecta cinis.
missa sub hostili domino captiva potestas,
decidit in humili gloria celsa loco.¹⁷ (1–10)

Although this is only a brief excerpt from a much longer work, the correspondences between the two poems make the Fortunatus poem an interesting analogue – even if it cannot be claimed as a direct source – especially since Venantius Fortunatus was known in Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁸ Of early Latin authors, Bede knew at least one of

¹⁶ K. Hume, 'The "Ruin Motif" in Old English Poetry', *Anglia* 94 (1976), 339–60, at 348.

¹⁷ *Venanti Honori Clementiani Fortunati presbyteri italici: Opera poetica*, ed. F. Leo, MGH Auct. antiq. 4.1 (Berlin, 1881), 271. 'O sad condition of war, O fate envious of things! With what sudden collapse have proud kingdoms fallen! The pinnacles, which had stood happy for so long, lie conquered, burned, beneath a great disaster. The halls which flourished in Imperial care – these the mournful cinders now roof, in place of vaults. The high gleaming roofs which once shone, adorned with red-gold metal – pale ash now smothers them. Power was sent as a captive to a hostile lord; lofty glory sank into a humble place.'

¹⁸ See R. W. Hunt, 'Manuscript Evidence for Knowledge of the Poems of

his poems, and Alcuin was familiar enough with his work to cite him as a source.¹⁹ It should not surprise us to discover, however, that the Anglo-Saxon author who seems to have known and used the works of Venantius Fortunatus more than any other Englishman of the period is Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury, bishop of Sherborne and ‘first English man of letters’.²⁰ It has been demonstrated, by Andy Orchard in particular, that Aldhelm knew the full range of Fortunatus’s work, both his monumental *Vita S. Martini*, as well as his eleven volumes of occasional poetry.²¹ This knowledge forms an important part of the ‘remembered reading’ which underlies Aldhelm’s own writings. And thus, when we find references to urban decay in Aldhelm, it may be tempting to see the influence of Fortunatus somewhere behind them.

Aldhelm’s attitude to the past is necessarily coloured by his Christian beliefs: we see this when he speaks of the folly of pagans in believing fate to be the guiding force of their lives. He throws this in

Venantius Fortunatus in Late Anglo-Saxon England’ (with an appendix, ‘Knowledge of the Poems in the Earlier Period’, by M. Lapidge), *ASE* 8 (1979), 279–95; Lapidge’s appendix is repr. in his *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899* (London, 1996), pp. 399–407. The findings of Hunt and Lapidge supersede those of J. D. A. Ogilvy, *Books Known to the English, 597–1066* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), p. 140. Influence of Venantius Fortunatus upon *The Ruin* has long been suspected. See, for example, A. Brandl, ‘Venantius Fortunatus und die angelsächsische Elegien *Wanderer* und *Ruine*’, *ASNSL* 139 (1919), 84; C. A. Hotchner, *Wessex and Old English Poetry, with Special Consideration of The Ruin* (New York, 1939), pp. 103–22, esp. 116–17, where she discusses knowledge of Venantius Fortunatus in Wessex; and Lee, ‘Bath or Babylon?’, p. 449.

¹⁹ Lapidge, ‘Earlier Period’, pp. 291–4. It is in the *Versus de patribus, regibus et sanctis Euboricensis ecclesiae* that Alcuin relies most heavily on Fortunatus, reproducing verbatim diction from the *Vita S. Martini*.

²⁰ M. Lapidge and J. L. Rosier, *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 1.

²¹ A. P. M. Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, *CSASE* 8 (Cambridge, 1994), 191–5.

as an appropriate aside during his narration of the life of St Benedict in his prose *De uirginitate*.

siquidem post deruta simulacrorum sacella et dissipatas fanaticae gentilitatis caeremonias, quae vitam veritatis expertem fato fortunae et genesi gubernari iuxta mathematicorum constellationem.²²

The Ruin is not given to such overt moralizing, but from the very start of the poem the relationship between paganism, fate and the destruction of the city is implicit. Line 1 mentions fate, and line 2 describes the *enta geweorc*, a term which I take to refer particularly to the remains left behind by a Roman, and importantly a pagan, civilization.²³ The reference in line 27 to *hyra wigsteal* ‘their temples’, implies a pagan sanctuary.²⁴ There is a degree of moral irony in the

²² *De uirginitate*, ch. 30: *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. R. Ehwald, MGH Auct. antiq. 15 (Berlin, 1919), 269. ‘After the sanctuaries of idols had been destroyed and the ceremonies of fanatical paganism routed – (paganism) which thinks according to the gang of astrologers, that life, empty of true meaning, is governed by the decree and formation of fortune.’ M. Lapidge and M. Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* (Ipswich, 1979), p. 90.

²³ The phrase *enta geweorc* appears a total of seven times in Old English verse (see Table 1 on p. 38 below), and although this precise collocation does not necessarily refer to Roman remains in all these texts, it is possible to infer from the use of *burh enta* as an epithet for Rome in *Elene* that the Romans could quite properly be described as ‘giants’ in Old English verse. For A. V. Talentino, the implication of *enta* in the context of *The Ruin* is men of a former age who lived outside of Christian morality (‘Moral Irony in *The Ruin*’, *Papers in Lang. and Lit.* 14 (1978), 3–10, at 5. On the wider meaning and significance of this phrase, see P. J. Frankis, ‘The Thematic Significance of *enta geweorc* and Related Imagery in *The Wanderer*’, *ASE* 2 (1973), 253–69; cf. E. V. Thornbury, ‘*eald enta geweorc* and the Relics of Empire: Revisiting the Dragon’s Lair in *Beowulf*’, below pp. 00–00.

²⁴ There has been some debate over the meaning of *wigsteal*; Leslie stated that ‘all the other compounds of *wīg* in Old English are used in the context of war’ (*Three Old English Elegies*, p. 73). As Wentersdorf points out (‘Observations on *The Ruin*’, p. 174), Leslie’s assertion is incorrect: *wigsteal* itself bears the

suggestion that these pagans, who believed in fate, were themselves undone by its capriciousness.²⁵ Aldhelm would surely have approved of such a conclusion, as he probably wished to associate St Benedict with the prophecy in Amos VII.9: ‘demolientur excelsa idoli et sanctificationes Israhel desolabuntur’.²⁶ This attitude unsurprisingly permeates Aldhelm’s writings, and yet it is well known that he read with great relish the works of pagan authors. His pupil, Æthilwald, wrote to praise Aldhelm the teacher for the ‘veritable sagacity of your blessedness, being imbued, I believe, with almost all praiseworthy writings, both of secular (literature) produced with the fluency of verbal eloquence, as well as of the spiritual corpus’. The eternal truths of scripture of course took precedence, but the pagan authors had left behind a body of work which was still praiseworthy for its form, if not for the belief system it may have represented. Likewise in *The Ruin*, the remains are magnificent, even if the pagans themselves have withered away.

Aldhelm’s potential indebtedness to Fortunatus and the *de excidio* tradition, however, reveals itself in specific episodes in his work

(Christian) meaning of ‘sanctuary’ in two Old English texts (*Leofric’s Vision*, ed. A. S. Napier, *Trans. of the Philol. Soc.* 1908, 184; *Laws of King Edmund*, ‘Be wifmannes beweddunge’: *Ancient Laws and Institutes of England*, ed. B. Thorpe (London, 1840) II, 254), and there are numerous compounds which are formed from *wig* and refer to pagan idols: see B–I, s.vv. ‘wiggild’, ‘wigsmið’, ‘wigweordung’, etc.

²⁵ This point has been made by Talentino, ‘Moral Irony’, 8–10; he probably goes too far, however, in ascribing a moralistic element to the poem; the description of the former inhabitants’ way of life (lines 32b–36), which Talentino reads as condemnation for their drunken wantonness and savagery in warfare and their profligate wealth, does not imply such condemnation: line 48b, *þæt is cynelic þing*, ‘that is a noble thing’, seems to close the poem on a positive note.

²⁶ ‘The high places of the idol shall be demolished, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste.’

rather than in his general outlook. In the *Carmen de uirginitate*, during the account of the life of St Sylvester, he tells us of a dream which the emperor Constantine had, and which Sylvester interpreted as an instruction that the imperial capital should be moved to Constantinople. In the dream, a hideous crone is revived from death and rejuvenated, and the emperor does her great honour. This is how Sylvester interprets the dream:

Femina, quam torua crevisti luce vetustam,
Quae tibi horrebat multum squalente senecta,
Urbs est, quam vulgo Bizanti nomine dicunt:
Constantinopolis post haec vocitetur in aevum!
Nomine nempe tuo gestat per saecula triumphos;
In qua murorum praecelsa cacumina quondam
Nunc prostrata solo veterescunt arce ruenti;
Moenia marcescunt et propugnacula nutant,
Quae quassat caries et frangit fessa vetustas.²⁷ (632–40)

Constantine is charged with rebuilding the city, and Aldhelm continues the construction metaphor:

Per quos erectis castrorum turribus altis
Moenia murorum restaures imbrice rubra!²⁸ (646–7)

The detail of the colour of the bricks, together with the description of the crumbling walls and battlements, is not traceable to a previous

²⁷ *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Ehwald, p. 379. ‘The woman, whom you thought was old in grim appearance, who disgusted you so much by her decrepit senility, is the city which men commonly call by the name of Byzantium: henceforth let it be called Constantinople for all time. Indeed, in your name it will perform triumphs throughout all ages. In this city the once lofty heights have grown old and now, fallen from their eminence, they lie strewn on the ground. The walls decay and the battlements totter – decay shatters these things and infirm old age destroys them.’ Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic Works*, p. 117.

²⁸ *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Ehwald, p. 380. ‘Having erected the lofty towers of a fortress, you shall renew the walls of the building with red brick.’ Lapidge and Rosier, *Poetic Works*, p. 117.

version of the *Vita Syluestri* and it strongly recalls parts of *The Ruin*.

Further extraneous details about the nature of building materials are found in Aldhelm's prose rendering of the episode from Sulpicius Severus's *Vita S. Martini* in which Martin destroys the pagan temples. The source text describes Martin's desire to destroy the temple, and the way in which he had to call upon divine assistance to achieve this goal.²⁹ Aldhelm usually extracts carefully the fundamental parts of the narrative from his sources in the prose *De uirginitate*, in line with the text's nature as a catalogue of saintly behaviour: there is little room for embellishment. And yet in this instance he goes on to describe the temples in much more detail than does Sulpicius:

Priscorum dilubra paganorum a cimentario politissimis compacta
petris rubrisque tegularum imbricibus tecta mortalium diffidens
amminiculo et angelorum fretus suffragio, qui hastati et scutati famulo
Dei praesidium laturi venisse leguntur, solo tenus deruta quassavit,
evertit, destruxit.³⁰

Here pagans are once again explicitly linked to building in stone: the shrines of their gods were evidently an impressive structure, built, like the city in *The Ruin*, by craftsmen. In the Old English, the builders are referred to as *waldend wyrhtan* 'lords and makers', or else possibly a compound meaning master-builders. This collocation of *waldend* and *wyrhta* occurs elsewhere in Old English as an epithet for the Christian

²⁹ Sulpicius Severus, *Vita S. Martini*, ch. 13. Quoted by Ehwald, *Aldhelmi Opera*, p. 261.

³⁰ *De uirginitate*, ch. 26: *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Ehwald, p. 262. 'The sanctuaries of the ancient pagans which had been constructed from stones polished by the mason and covered with red roof tiles, he shattered, overturned and destroyed by casting them to the ground, distrusting the assistance of mortals and relying on the help of the angels, who are said to have come armed with spears and shields to bring aid to the servant of God.' Lapidge and Herren, *Prose Works*, p. 85.

deity;³¹ this implies a high degree of approbation for the creative skills of these heathen artisans, and the temples that Aldhelm describes are also worthy of mention for the quality of their construction.

Although terracotta or clay roof tiles are naturally red, it is interesting to note that both Aldhelm and the *Ruin*-poet both specifically describe the roofs of the buildings as being this colour. In line 30 of *The Ruin* there is a very unusual descriptive phrase which expresses this: *ond þæs teaforgeapa tigelum sceadeð*. *Tigel* for ‘roof tile’ is found nowhere else in the poetic corpus, and *teaforgeap* is a hapax legomenon, the meaning of which has been much disputed, but which is a compound with the first element meaning ‘red lead’.³² This has been adduced partly from its appearance as a gloss for Latin *minium* in the Antwerp glossary.³³ *Tigelum*, which is not uncommon in prose, is also found in glosses, and it is used to gloss the lemma *imbricibus* in the same passage on St Martin from Aldhelm’s prose *De uirginitate* in two manuscripts: Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, 1650,³⁴ and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 146.³⁵ So the *Ruin*-poet appears to choose words which might have been obtained from glossaries to

³¹ See Table 1 (below, p. 38) for text references.

³² See Klinck, *Old English Elegies*, p. 216. The rendering of *teaforgeapa* that she adopts is ‘this red-arched thing’, this ‘arch of red stone’.

³³ Antwerp, Plantin-Moretus Museum 47. Printed by T. Wright, *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, 2nd ed., rev. R. P. Wülker, 2 vols. (London, 1884) I, 34. There is also an edition by L. Kindschi, *The Latin–Old English Glossaries in Plantin Moretus 32 and British Museum MS Additional 32246* (unpubl. PhD dissertation, Stanford Univ., 1956).

³⁴ *The Old English Glosses of MS. Brussels, 1650 (Aldhelm’s De laudibus uirginitatis)*, ed. L. Goossens, *Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België: Klasse der Letteren* 74 (Brussels, 1974), 291 (glossing line 2218).

³⁵ *Old English Glosses, Chiefly Unpublished*, ed. A. S. Napier, *Anecdota Oxoniensia* 4 (Oxford, 1900), nos. 10, 2261 and 2262.

describe almost exactly the same architectural detail as the text from in which one of the glosses was available.

Throughout, the vocabulary of *The Ruin* is highly idiosyncratic, and merits further discussion. Of the 225 words in this poem, 37 are found nowhere else in Old English verse, which equates to 16.4%, and of these 37, 24 are unique compounds. Although a comparison with the rest of Old English is difficult, such an incidence of hapax legomena seems unusually high. Many of the compounds are part of a vocabulary of architectural and topographical description newly coined to describe an urban scene, and so the proportion of new words is perhaps unsurprising, but this reliance on neologisms displaces to a large extent the formulaic diction which normally characterizes this type of poetry. Apart from *enta geweorc* in line 2, there are only seven formulas which appear elsewhere in the corpus; even these are rarely found in an identical syntactic or metrical situation. The effect of this switch from formulaic doublets to unusual, apparently newly-invented compounds is to create a heightened poetic vocabulary which requires greater interpretation on the part of the audience, which was probably accustomed to the repetition of standard formulas as both a structural device, and a way of placing a text within a wider poetic context known to them. The vocabulary of *The Ruin* is part of a process of defamiliarization, which shifts the text slightly away from the expected norms of Old English verse. This process might be said to mirror the lexical choices made by Aldhelm and other authors of 'hermeneutic' Latin, where archaisms, Graecisms and glossary words all contributed to the complex, prolix and somewhat tortuous nature of their prose.³⁶

³⁶ The vocabulary of the hermeneutic style was defined by Lapidge as 'the ostentatious parade of unusual, often very arcane and apparently learned vocabulary', including archaisms, neologisms, and loan-words, particularly from Greek. 'The Hermeneutic Style in Tenth-Century Anglo-Latin Literature', *ASE*

Formula in <i>The Ruin</i>	Other Exeter Book poems	Poems from other codices
1 <i>wrætlic is þes wealstan</i>		<i>Maxims II</i> 3
2 <i>enta geweorc</i>	<i>Wanderer</i> 87	<i>Maxims II</i> 2 <i>Beowulf</i> 2717, 2774 <i>Andreas</i> 1235, 1495
7 <i>waldend wyrhtan</i>		<i>Christ and Satan</i> 584 <i>Andreas</i> 702 <i>Metres of Boethius</i> 30, 7
11 <i>steap geap</i>		<i>Maxims II</i> 23 <i>Solomon and Saturn</i> 453 <i>Genesis A</i> 2558
25 <i>swylyt eall fornóm</i>		<i>Juliana</i> 675
34 <i>wlonc ond wingal</i>	<i>Seafarer</i> 29	
41 <i>hat on breþre</i>		<i>Beowulf</i> 3148

Table 1. Formulaic diction in *The Ruin*.

As can be seen from Table 1, the one text which shows a surprisingly high number of verbal parallels to *The Ruin* is *Maxims II*. In the first five lines, we learn that cities are seen from afar, the ingenious work of giants, those which there are on this earth, wondrous work of wall-stones’:

Cyning sceal rice healdan. Ceastra beoð feorran gesyne,
orðanc enta geweorc, þa þe on þysse eorðan syndon,
wrætlic weallstana geweorc. Wind byð on lyfte swiftust,

4 (1975), 67–111, at 67, repr. in his *Anglo-Latin Literature, 900–1066* (London, 1993), pp. 105–149; see also the remarks of J. Marenbon, ‘Les sources du vocabulaire d’Aldhelm’, *Archivum Latinitatis Medii Aevi (Bulletin du Cange)* 41 (1979), 75–90. J. W. Earl, ‘Hisperic Style in the Old English “Rhyming Poem”’, *PMLA* 102 (1987), 187–96, attempts, with limited success, to apply the criteria of hermeneutic Latin style to the Old English *Riming Poem*, which is also found in the Exeter Book.

þunar byð þragum hludast. þrymmas syndan Cristes mycclē,
wyrð byð swiðost.³⁷ (1–5a)

Here, fate is said to be the most severe, recalling line 24b of *The Ruin*, *wyrð seo swiþe*. It seems strange that a poem of such a general proverbial aspect should use phrases which are found also in a poem which is so rooted in a specific location, and which uses such an unusual vocabulary to describe a specific scene. As *Maxims II* is believed to be among the earliest extant Old English poems, possibly dating in some form to the conversion period,³⁸ we might safely assume that if the author of *The Ruin* borrows from any one vernacular text, *Maxims II* is that poem.

But the author of *The Ruin* departs from the norms of Old English not merely by his use of a non-standard vocabulary. He or she also demonstrates a number of stylistic quirks which seem unusual, but which may have parallels in Anglo-Latin. The most striking example of this is the prevalence of double alliteration, where two stressed syllables in the first half-line alliterate with each other as well as with a stressed syllable in the off-line. 80% (32 out of 40) of the legible verses in *The Ruin* feature double alliteration, which is clearly a very conscious effect. The *oppæt*-clause at line 24, which is the culmination of the first half of the poem, with its reference to fate as an agent of change, has only single alliteration, after a very

³⁷ ASPR VI, 55. ‘A king must rule a kingdom. Cities are seen from afar, the ingenious work of giants, those which there are on this earth, wondrous work of wall-stones. Wind is swiftest in the air, thunder the loudest in its seasons. The powers of Christ are great; fate is the most severe.’

³⁸ See, e.g., A. Brandl, ‘Vom kosmologischen Denken des heidnisch-christlichen Germanentums: der früh-ags. Schicksalspruch der Handschrift Tiberius B.13 und seine Verwandtheit mit Boethius’, *Sitzungsberichte der preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Klasse* 16 (1937), 116–25; A. Ricci, ‘The Chronology of Anglo-Saxon Poetry’, *RES* 5 (1929), 257–66.

nearly continuous string of double-alliterating verses up to this point; this patterning directs our attention to fate's role in the city's decay. Elsewhere in Old English, double alliteration is fairly common, with an average of almost 47% of lines bearing this type of alliteration, but no other poem is nearly so insistent in its use of this device.³⁹

Aldhelm, it has been suggested, made a feature of alliteration in imitation of vernacular practice in his octosyllabic Latin verse,⁴⁰ and this includes some instances of double alliteration, but Aldhelm's approach to this device is unsystematic, and only 23% of the lines in his *Carmen rhythmicum* feature double alliteration. It is in the works of his pupil, Æthilwald, that the rate of double alliteration in Latin octosyllables shoots up above even the average distribution of this type of line in Old English, and the structure of these lines is practically identical to that of the vernacular model. There is little doubt that Æthilwald consciously imitated vernacular verses, as Aldhelm rebuked him in a letter for perhaps straying too close to the pagan poetry that Æthilwald suggests he learnt from Aldhelm himself.⁴¹ Æthilwald's alliterative practices in his octosyllabic verse show that he has learnt all too well the art of secular versification. In his poetry, for example, all vowels alliterate with each other, and *f*, *v* and *ph* all alliterate, just as in Anglo-Saxon macaronic poetry.⁴² And, as both his poetry and *The Ruin* stand so far above comparable texts in their use of double alliteration, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to postulate potential influence of the one upon the other. It may seem

³⁹ B. R. Hutcheson, *Old English Poetic Metre* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 271.

⁴⁰ M. Lapidge, 'Aldhelm's Latin Poetry and Old English Verse', *Comparative Lit.* 31 (1979), 209–31, at 218–23, repr. in his *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899*, pp. 247–269; Orchard, *Poetic Art*, pp. 45–7.

⁴¹ Aldhelm, *Letter to Æthilwald: Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. Ehwald, p. 500. Trans. Lapidge and Herren, *Prose Works*, p. 168.

⁴² Orchard, *Poetic Art*, p. 49, n. 114.

a perverse line of argument, that a specifically Germanic metrical feature should lead to the suggestion of Latin influence, but through Aldhelm, Æthilwald and down into the octosyllables of other West Saxon poets such as Boniface and his circle, all of whom existed in a West Saxon literary milieu similar to that which probably produced *The Ruin*, alliteration was almost as much a part of Anglo-Latin stylistics as it was of Old English.⁴³ Latin authors, however, did not rely on alliteration for their metre as vernacular poets generally do; it was a conscious poetic effect, and the heightened use of double alliteration in *The Ruin* seems to be an attempt to achieve something similar. That the *Ruin*-poet's approach to double alliteration may be paralleled with Æthilwald's is perhaps shown by the fact that *Riddle* 40, a translation of one of Aldhelm's Latin *Enigmata*, in fact shows considerably less than average double alliteration: 30%, which is not too far away from the 23% of lines in Aldhelm's rhythmical verse which exhibit this feature. This may constitute evidence that Latinate Anglo-Saxon poets were capable of a good deal of sensitivity in choosing when and where they appropriated stylistic effects from the other tradition.

There are other stylistic features which may have derived from Latin: the six instances of rhyme in this poem, and the other instances of rhyme in Old English verse, have been identified as a Latinate device,⁴⁴ although the internal half-line rhyme of lines such as *scorene, gedrorene* (5b) and *steap geap gedreas* (10b) much more closely resembles the type of rhyme which predominates in Old English verse – with the exception of *The Riming Poem* and lines 1236–50 of *Elene*, both of which texts exhibit something akin to leonine rhyme –

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 242–53.

⁴⁴ Earl, 'Hisperic Style', pp. 189–91. The best discussion of rhyme in Old English is that of O. D. Macrae-Gibson in the introduction to his edition of *The Old English Riming Poem* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 21–5.

than the end-rhyme which is often found in Anglo-Latin couplets.⁴⁵ *The Ruin* is also notable for its unusually low incidence of enjambment; most lines are self-contained sense units.⁴⁶ Aldhelm, too, is noticeable for the prevalence of end-stopping in his hexameter verse, perhaps as a result of his inexperience with the metre;⁴⁷ his caesura-patterning is simplistic and unvaried, with the caesura in his hexameter lines falling with great regularity in the middle of the hexameter line, creating something similar to vernacular half-lines.⁴⁸ It seems clear that even the stylistic quirks of the *Ruin*-poet cannot be sourced to a particular Anglo-Latin author, they can often be paralleled in the works of Aldhelm and his followers.

There has been a growing suspicion over the years that Old English and Anglo-Latin poetry must have been mutually influential;⁴⁹ Anglo-Saxon poets who wrote in Latin would naturally have known Old English, and William of Malmesbury's oft-quoted description of Aldhelm's unmatched prowess as a vernacular poet is worth mentioning again.⁵⁰ It is interesting to note that the poems for which

⁴⁵ See F. Kluge, 'Zur Geschichte des Reimes im Altgermanischen', *Paul Braunn Beiträge* 9 (1894), 422–50, esp. 425–6 and 429–30. Of Old English poems, *Beowulf* appears to contain the most instances of this type of rhyme; *steap geap gedreas* resembles *Beowulf* 1423a *flod blode weol*, and even more closely resembles *Exodus* 463b *flod blod gewod*.

⁴⁶ Not until lines 6b–7a is there a phrase which makes no sense within a half-line: another extreme stylistic effect; Lee, 'Bath or Babylon?', p. 452.

⁴⁷ Lapidge, 'Aldhelm's Latin Poetry', p. 217. Orchard, *Poetic Art*, p. 115, postulates that Aldhelm's attitude towards end-stopped hexameters may indicate the influence of 'oral tradition'.

⁴⁸ Orchard, *Poetic Art*, pp. 92–4.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., W. F. Bolton, 'Pre-Conquest Anglo-Latin: Perspectives and Prospects', *Comparative Lit.* 23 (1971), 151–66; Earl, 'Hispanic Style', p. 187; and Lapidge, 'Aldhelm's Latin Poetry'.

⁵⁰ *Gesta Pontificum*, ed. N. E. S. A. Hamilton, RS (London, 1870), p. 336.

influence of Anglo-Latin have been claimed are generally associated with a West Saxon literary milieu: Michael Lapidge has forcefully argued for a West Saxon origin for *Beowulf*,⁵¹ whilst James W. Earl's insistence that the Exeter Book *Riming Poem* constitutes an example of 'hispanic' Old English analogous to 'hermeneutic' Latin would militate in favour of a West Saxon origin, as the hermeneutic style was developed and popularized in West Saxon foundations. The translation of Aldhelm's *Enigma c*, 'De creatura', into Old English is similarly preserved in the Exeter Book as *Riddle* 40. It seems incontestable that *The Ruin* should be viewed as part of this same bilingual tradition of West Saxon poetics: first, it is almost certainly a poem describing Bath, and it is preserved in a Wessex manuscript. The stylistic features shared by *The Ruin* and Latin poems of Aldhelm and his followers are suggestive, but they can be no more than that: to compare Old English verse and Latin hexametrical or octosyllabic verse is not to compare like with like: their verse forms must, by their nature, differ much more than they agree.

The Ruin, however, is not to be associated with the West Saxon Anglo-Latin tradition merely on stylistic grounds; there is a cumulative weight of evidence, which seems incontrovertible. *The Ruin*'s formulaic diction may be found in a small number of texts, all with possible West Saxon connections: *The Wanderer* is preserved in the Exeter Book; *Beowulf* is possibly West Saxon and has been associated with Aldhelm, and *Andreas* may be closely connected to *Beowulf*, on lexical grounds; *Maxims II* has been claimed as a West Saxon production.⁵² There are also the similarities between *The Ruin*

⁵¹ M. Lapidge, 'Beowulf, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum* and Wessex', *SM*, 3rd ser. 23 (1982), 151–92, repr. in his *Anglo-Latin Literature, 600–899*, pp. 271–312.

⁵² The provenance of *Maxims II*, which is preserved only in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.i (s. xi^{med}), is unclear; two suggestions have been offered. S. A. Brooke, *The History of Early English Literature*, 2 vols. (London,

and the *De excidio Thuringiae* of Venantius Fortunatus, whose work was sufficiently well known in early Wessex that King Ine (688–726) had an epigram based upon Fortunatus's poems inscribed in his new church at Glastonbury; Aldhelm is otherwise the only Southumbrian author who demonstrably quotes from Fortunatus.⁵³ Most compelling of all, though, are the direct links between the motif of ruined cities in *The Ruin* and the works of Aldhelm. Kathryn Hume, rightly stressing that motif study must be rigorous to have any validity or usefulness, argues that there is no 'ruin motif' in Old English poetry;⁵⁴ I think it safe to say, however, that the use made of ruin imagery by Aldhelm and the author of *The Ruin* constitutes a motif by itself, a motif which represents a shared attitude towards the Roman past; but it is a motif within Anglo-Saxon poetry, not merely Old English. The peculiarities of *The Ruin* may best be explained by examining them in the context of an Anglo-Saxon poetic culture which breaks down the barriers between Latin and the vernacular, just as Aldhelm broke down those barriers when he interspersed his crowd-pleasing tales in Old English with quotations from scripture.⁵⁵

1892) II, 241–90 discusses the *Maxims* poems and argues that they were composed at York. A Wessex origin is hypothesized, albeit on not much firmer grounds, by M. Anderson and B. C. Williams, *Old English Handbook* (Boston, MA, 1935), p. 287.

⁵³ Lapidge, 'Earlier Period', pp. 402–3.

⁵⁴ Hume, 'The "Ruin Motif"', pp. 259–60.

⁵⁵ I should like to thank Andy Orchard and Emily Thornbury for their help with this paper, and the members of the 2000 Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, particularly Clare Lynch, for their helpful discussion.