PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Creation, Migration, and Conquest: Imaginary Geography and
Sense of Space in Old English Literature* (review)

Paul Battles

JEGP, Journal of English and Germanic Philology, Volume 108, Number
1, January 2009, pp. 102-104 (Review)

Published by University of Illinois Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/egp.0.0000>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/255703>

collection set for future studies in the field. As a whole, the essays draw on an impressive range of scholarly expertise and represent an exemplary achievement in interdisciplinary studies of Anglo-Saxon culture. In some few cases the essays reflect their genesis as conference papers and yet maintain a sophistication of approach to problems and issues of historical source study. This collection, and indeed all three *Sancta Crux/Halig Rod* volumes, will be mandatory reading for anyone interested in the devotional culture of, and especially the cult of the cross in, Anglo-Saxon England.

RICHARD F. JOHNSON

Harper College

CREATION, MIGRATION, AND CONQUEST: IMAGINARY GEOGRAPHY AND SENSE OF SPACE IN OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE. By Fabienne L. Michelet. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xii + 297; 9 illustrations. \$99.

This volume studies representations of space in Anglo-Saxon poetry, historical and geographical writings, and the Cotton *mapa mundi* (London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.v. I, fol. 56v). Focusing on three tropes—creation, migration, and conquest—Michelet argues persuasively that the control of space is a central theme in Old English literature.

Chapter 1 introduces two key theoretical concepts, the “spatial *imaginaire*” and the “mental map.” The Anglo-Saxons’ spatial *imaginaire* can be reconstructed from “the geographical descriptions, the cosmological models, and the wider spatial imagery found in Old English literature” (p. 9). Mental maps entail six characteristics that delineate this *imaginaire*: distance and boundaries; centrality and marginality; knowing and appropriating places; “othering” as a means of denying rival claims to disputed land; origin narratives that authenticate one’s territorial ambitions; and the close relationship between possession of a space and personal, social, and political identity. *Creation, Migration, and Conquest* focuses on these strategies throughout.

In the second chapter, Michelet turns to Old English poetic creation narratives. “Creation” is here understood in a broad sense, including not only stories about the origin of the world (such as *Cædmon’s Hymn* and *Genesis A*) but also poems that describe the establishment or expansion of territory (Constantine’s defeat of the Huns and Goths in *Elene*, Scyld’s subjugation of neighboring tribes in *Beowulf*, and the saint’s seizure of the barrow in *Guthlac A*), works that display God’s power over creation (*Christ and Satan*, *Genesis B*, *Riddle 40*, and *Order of the World*), and also *Widsith*, which “linguistically seizes a geographical extension, an imaginary continental homeland” (p. 44). Parts of this discussion seem forced; despite the arguments advanced on pages 40–44 and 52–53, it is difficult to see how our understanding of *Widsith* and *Guthlac A* is advanced by reading them primarily (or even secondarily) as creation narratives. On the other hand, the readings of *Genesis A*, *Genesis B*, and *Christ and Satan* on pp. 55–72 are not only original but extremely convincing.

The dwellings of *Beowulf* form the subject of the third chapter in *Creation, Migration, and Conquest*. Michelet urges that the traditional view, which posits a dichotomy between civilized and monstrous dwellings, is only partly correct because, for all their differences, the two actually mirror each other. For example, the poem’s monsters live in halls that are constructed (not natural), and these offer their inhabitants shelter and contain precious artefacts; in short, they are

associated with many of the same traits as Hrothgar's and Beowulf's halls. This suggests a deep-seated spatial ambiguity which reveals an anxiety about distinguishing between the civilized and the monstrous. In the end "no unambiguous distinction can be made between the world of men and that of monsters" (p. 95). There is also a perceptive discussion of the gaze in *Beowulf* and in *Judith*; when these poems' heroes display the severed heads of Grendel and Holofernes as public spectacles, they employ the gaze as a means to establish identity and power. One might add that both Grendel and his mother are also associated with the gaze in *Beowulf*: the poet stresses how Grendel gazes at the sleeping Geats before attacking (ll. 726b-730a), and the display of Æschere's severed head both anticipates Grendel's decapitation and follows the placement of his arm on Heorot.

Turning from fictional treatments of distant lands to the Anglo-Saxons' understanding of their own island's place in the world, Chapter 4 examines how space is negotiated in historical and geographical documents. For classical writers such as Strabo, Caesar, and Tacitus, Britain is characterized above all by its remoteness, and its far-Northern location is metonymic for wildness. Early medieval *mappae mundi* produced outside of England mirror this tradition by situating the island beyond the *oikumene*, within the encircling sea. Anglo-Saxon authors contest this spatial arrangement. For example, the reports of Ohthere and Wulfstan in the Old English *Orosius* depict England as starting-point for voyages of exploration. Such exploration is not only a sign of the realm's civilized status, but it also pushes the boundaries of the known world outward, changing England's status as a liminal territory. The Cotton *mappa mundi* reveals a similar strategy; it brings England into physical proximity with the Continent and depicts islands that lie beyond it. On the whole, the material presented in this chapter is useful, though it is odd to find the Irish geographer Dicuil treated in a section entitled "Anglo-Saxon Views of Britain's Geographical Location." A brief explanation of how Dicuil's *Liber de mensura orbis terrae* is relevant to the Anglo-Saxons' spatial *imaginaire* would have been helpful.

Chapter 5 shows that spatial and territorial concerns lie at the heart of many Old English saints' lives, particularly *Guthlac A*, *Elene*, *Andreas*, and—though it is technically not a *vita*—*The Fates of the Apostles*. Like secular heroes who secure territories for their tribes and thus allow their people to flourish, saints, through their missions to distant places, acquire new lands in which the Christian religion can flourish. Hero and saint venture from the center to liminal realms, vanquish (or convert) the hostile people who live there, and extend the frontiers of the civilized world. Formerly wild and bleak places are transformed into useful, beneficial ones. Once, for example, Guthlac has wrested control of the barrow away from the wretched spirits, this erstwhile "desolate and deserted" place becomes "the most beloved place on earth." As Michelet explains, the apparently contradictory depictions of foreign locales in the saints' lives result from this dichotomy: "lands are hostile and frightening when they function as 'constituting others' or when they are the stage on which heroic deeds are performed; they are pleasant and attractive areas when they are inviting conquest or once they have been appropriated by the hero" (p. 176).

The Junius Manuscript scriptural paraphrases—*Genesis A*, *Exodus*, and *Daniel*—are examined in the sixth chapter. In this trio of poems, the dominant spatial trope is that of migration. The migration scenes in *Genesis A* derive from its Biblical source, but the Old English poet systematically alters or expands these passages in ways that reflect the Anglo-Saxon spatial *imaginaire*. The image of a journeying

nation is central to *Exodus*; God's reward to those who remain faithful is territorial in nature, and furthermore the *Exodus* poet "constantly emphasizes territorial aspects inherent in the Hebrews' escape from Egypt" (p. 208). Meanwhile, both the Jews and later also Nebuchadnezzar are deprived of their homes in *Daniel*, which underscores a motif prominent throughout the Junius poems, namely that the ultimate control over any space is God's alone. The denial of territory—whether in the expulsion from Eden, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the drowning of Pharaoh's army before it can reach land, or the Babylonian captivity—is a thematic thread that runs throughout these works. This excellent chapter could be strengthened by addressing more clearly how, precisely, the Jewish captivity depicted in *Daniel* can be considered a migration; as Michelet herself notes, "A migration is not an exile; for expectation of future abodes motivates the voyage itself" (p. 231). However, the discussion of territorial punishment in that poem is entirely convincing, as is the whole analysis of *Genesis A*.

The final chapter discusses "Narrative Strategies for the Conquest of Britain," examining the different depictions of the *adventus Saxonum* in Gildas, Bede, and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Gildas depicts the coming of the Anglo-Saxon invaders as divine retribution for the failings of the British people and—especially—of their leaders; if they will turn from sin, God will expel the foreigners and return the island to its rightful owners. Bede, on the other hand, depicts the Britons as too weak and cowardly to control the island; moreover, the Germanic invaders are destined to be converted to Christianity, and thus their conquest of Britain becomes an event willed by God. In contrast to these moralizing narratives, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle presents a more objective picture: "It does not attempt to mitigate the violence of the invasion and it clearly bases on military power and on fighting the right a people might have to possess a given tract of land" (p. 267).

Michelet's study of the Anglo-Saxon spatial *imaginaire* is one of the best recent books on Old English literature. Its great strengths are the persuasiveness with which it argues that spatial issues are crucial to many Old English poems and its skill in explicating textual passages that support this thesis. While the book draws on much recent criticism on space in medieval literature—especially the work of Paul Zumthor, Nicholas Howe, and Jacques Le Goff, who are the book's most frequently cited critics—Michelet's discussions are never merely derivative. The discussions of *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, *Andreas*, and *Guthlac A* are important contributions in their own right. In sum, *Creation, Migration, and Conquest* is a thoughtful and thought-provoking discussion of space in Old English literature.

PAUL BATTLES

Hanover College

THE EXETER DVD. THE EXETER ANTHOLOGY OF OLD ENGLISH POETRY. Edited by Bernard J. Muir. Programming by Nick Kennedy. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006. \$425.

The simplest way to begin this review is to say that there is good news and bad news. *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry* DVD is a reproduction of the manuscript that is more commonly known as *The Exeter Book*. As a reproduction the DVD is wonderful. The user puts in the DVD, familiarizes him or herself with the software, and then examines the text of *The Exeter Book* to his or her heart's content. The software allows the user to focus in on obscure passages and to move from one passage in *The Exeter Book* to another quite easily. One of my prized possessions is