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All That Is Wrought Is Not Gold: Locating Wealth in Old English Gnostic Texts

That references to wealth are present all over Old English poetry is beyond doubt; likewise beyond doubt is the fact that representations of wealth attained a form of cult status in our contemporary renditions of Old English culture: we see Beowulf wanting to feast his eyes on the treasure before he dies, our imagination is captivated by the serendipitous finding of the Staffordshire hoard and we are transfixed by the Beowulfian, Tolkienian, and Peter Jackson's dragon guarding the gold-hoard. The present essay shall be an attempt at outlining several of the cultural contexts in which wealth and ideas related to it operated within Old English wisdom poetry. My intention here is not to follow the references to Old English wealth in general, but, having proposed the boundaries within which it appears to be located, I shall refer to several examples confirming these boundaries in the context of Old English gnomic verse, accompanied by references to the allegorical applications of wealth presented by the book outlining and fashioning the later existential outlooks of Old English poetry, that is Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Iob* "Morals in the Book of Job."

In a sense, one does not need to look very far to locate wealth in Old English poetry. It lies, after all, at the very beginning of one of the sources of Old English written culture. Wealth, or rather *feoh*, is the verbal sense and equivalent of the first of the runic signs constituting the Anglo-Saxon *futhorc*. As such, it is to be found in the Old English *Rune Poem*, a catalogue text explaining the meaning of individual runes in short poetic statements that most likely had mnemonic functions. Its single original burned down in the 1731 fire of Sir Robert Cotton's library in the Ashburnham house, the same fire that charred *Beowulf* and annihilated *The Battle of Maldon* along with several other manuscripts, but poem survived

in Humfrey Wanley's transcription printed by George Hickes in 1705.¹ Wealth as the name of the first rune in the *Rune Poem* is also to be found in two other poetic catalogues of runes, presumably deriving from earlier sources, the Icelandic and Norwegian rune poems from the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively, while the short ninth-century *Abe- cedarium Nordmannicum* begins with a pithy *feu forman* "wealth first."² Of all of these the Old English *Rune Poem* provides by far the most elaborate poeticised expositions of the meanings behind each of the *futhorc* signs, which often resound with the tones familiar from Old English gnostic verse, the Exeter and Cotton *Maxims* most notably. Of *feoh* the poem says the following:

ƿ Feoh byþ frofur fira gehwylcum;
 sceal ðeah manna gehwylc miclun hyt dælan
 gif he wile for drihtne domes hleotan.

Rune Poem, 1–3

[Wealth is a comfort to everyone;
 but each man must give it away
 if he wishes to achieve glory before God; cast lots.]³

It is here, in the compact form of the first opening sign and its exposition that we can see the origins and the paradoxical complexity of the Old English attitudes to wealth which this essay is going to probe into. The first thing is its firm footing in the pre-Christian cultural background, just as the runic signs are a script originating in pre-Christian Germanic cultures. The *Rune Poem* clearly displays an admiration for wealth, for its power to secure some *frofur* "comfort," "consolation," or "benefit" and,

¹ See Maureen Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem: A Critical Edition* (Toronto – Buffalo – London: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 21–32. For a more recent discussion of the poem see Angel Millar, "The Old English *Rune Poem* – semantics, structure, and symmetry," *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 34 (2006): 419–36.

² Margaret Clunies Ross, "The Anglo-Saxon and Norse *Rune Poem*: A Comparative Study," *Anglo-Saxon England* 19 (1990): 23–39.

³ Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, ed., *The Anglo Saxon Minor Poems* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1942), 28. Unless otherwise stated, translations into modern English are my own.

implicitly, a position of eminence and prestige it secures and denotes. All this resounds with echoes of Tacitus's well-known comments on the special appeal that bounty and riches held for the tribes of first-century Germania, which would *Pigrum quinimmo et iners videtur, sudore acquirere, quod possis sanguine parare*⁴ "make them think it tame and stupid to acquire by the sweat of toil what they might win by their blood."⁵ In an incidental but notable correlation, *feoh* "wealth" is phonetically not far from *feoht* "fight," as if the two were close also in the phonetic dimension of Old English, along with earlier Germanic languages. The *Norwegian Rune Poem*, along with its more poetic Icelandic counterpart, point to this relationship, stressing the discord that wealth brings among men:

Fé vældr frænda róge;
føðesk ulfr í skóge.

Norwegian Rune Poem, 1–2

[Wealth is a source of discord among kinsmen;
the wolf lives in the forest.]⁶

The Old English *Rune Poem*, however, does not speak of discord, but of the comfort that wealth brings, even if, originally, it was a fruit of a conflict. What follows the poem's first line lies in an apparent paradox to it – if, within the heroic paradigm, wealth is understood as a way of securing fame among the living and thus a way to attain fame beyond earthly life, the poem makes it clear that attaining glory in the eyes of God is only possible by a willing act of passing the wealth on to others. Christian though it may seem at first glance, for it invokes the Christian ideas of sharing and *caritas*, this line in itself is also tightly connected to the speculative pre-Christian roots of the poem in two essential aspects.

⁴ Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *De origine et situ Germanorum*, The Latin Library, accessed December 1, 2013, <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/tacitus/tac.ger.shtml>.

⁵ Tacitus, *Germany*, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb. Internet Sacred Texts Archive, accessed December 1, 2013, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/tac/g01010.htm>.

⁶ Daniel G. Calder et al., eds. and trans., *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry. Volume II: The Major Germanic Texts in Translation* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1983), 166.

Firstly, the heroic paradigm would have its followers attain immortality in the form of a grateful memory of their peoples advanced by the very act of the distribution of amassed riches. In *Beowulf*, *sincgifa* “treasure-giver” (l. 2311) is possibly the most telling kenning for Beowulf the man, whose death, in the words of Wiglaf, marks the end of the time of *sincþego ond swyrdgifu* “the treasure-giving and giving of swords” (l. 2884).⁷ The *Bosworth-Toller Dictionary* lists no fewer than sixteen kennings with the word *gifa* “giver,” of which eight bear direct reference to riches: *beāhgifa* “ring-giver,” *beāggifa* “crown/ring-giver,” *blæðgifa* “cup-giver,” *eādgifa* “giver of prosperity/happiness,” *goldgifa* “gold-giver,” *māððungifa* “giver of valuable gifts,” *sincgifa* “treasure-giver,” *wilgifa* “giver of pleasure / what is desirable.”⁸ Secondly, the Christian generosity implied by the poem must have fitted very well into the culture whose origins would value bounteousness especially highly. Pre-Christian or Christian, gift-giving and receiving were an inherent part of the Old English and Germanic culture in its material and spiritual dimension.⁹ Thus, what appears to be paradoxical in the first lines of the *Rune Poem* or what appears to conjoin pre-Christian and Christian heritage is explainable in both perspectives. In both of these heritages, one is truly wealthy, regardless whether the riches are tangible or intangible, if one can afford to share or give one’s wealth away.

It is therefore in the first of the *Rune Poem*’s elucidations that I symbolically see the boundaries within which Anglo-Saxon attitudes to wealth are located. Stemming from the pre-Christian tradition, the concept of wealth is at the very forefront of social organisation. The Old High German *Abecedarium Nordmannicum* succinctly phrases it as *feu*

⁷ George Jack, ed., *Beowulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 193.

⁸ Also: *ārgifa* “honour-giver,” *atgifa* “giver of food,” *beāhgifa* “ring-giver,” *beāggifa* “crown/ring-giver,” *blæðgifa* “cup-giver,” *eādgifa* “giver of prosperity/happiness,” *feorhgifa* “giver of life/soul,” *goldgifa* “gold-giver,” *hyhtgifa* “giver of hope/joy,” *lācgifa* “gift/game-giver,” *māððungifa* “giver of valuable gifts,” *rædgifa* “counsel-giver,” *sincgifa* “treasure-giver,” *symbelgifa* “feast-giver,” *wilgifa* “giver of pleasure/what is desirable,” *willgifa* “fountain-giver.” Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, eds., *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898 [1932]), 474–5.

It appears to derive from a Proto-Germanic word **fehu*, translatable as “wealth” or “cattle.”

⁹ See, for instance, John M. Hill, “*Beowulf* and the Danish Succession: Gift-Giving as an Occasion for Complex Gesture,” *Medievalia et humanistica* 11 (1982): 177–97.

forman “wealth first,”¹⁰ and although it relates to the first position in the order of signs, it also indicates the prominence of wealth itself. As much as it defines and positions the man against others, it is also immediately related to the idea of generosity, placing the generous man well above the ungenerous one. The riches are to be distributed in order to truly serve their purpose as a status denominator and their distribution is connected to the Christian dimension of wealth, understood both literally and figuratively. In the literal sense wealth is a ballast that can, however, be lessened by the acts of Christian *caritas*. The act of sharing momentarily transforms the man in the eyes of God and figuratively transmutes wealth into the true riches of divine grace and human wisdom. Hence the Old English wealth is at once to be possessed and not to be possessed, it is the concept that bespeaks attraction and danger, it is enchanting and yet repulsive. Thus, it is and is not ambivalent, it is and is not paradoxical, and the manner in which it is presented in the corpus of Old English texts both positions it within and redeems it from its pre-Christian connotations.

The two approaches to treasure, gold, and riches that are already familiar from the literal and figurative understanding of wealth that the *Rune Poem* carries, may be encountered in the first dialogue of Solomon and Saturn from Cambridge Corpus Christi College MS. The cryptic, riddlic, and gnomic dialogue between Saturn, a Chaldean prince, and King Solomon focuses on the secret powers of the *gepalmtwigoda Pater Noster* “palm-twiggged Pater Noster” about which Saturn wants to learn and which Solomon presents as a prayer that acquires the capacities of a mystical being, whose each letter is capable of fighting and overcoming the devil.¹¹ It is tempting to see the dialogue as a confrontation of pagan and Christian wisdom represented by Saturn and Solomon respectively. Seen in this light, the poetic dialogue might be understood as a gnostic Christian answer to the *Rune Poem*, as the individual letters of the canticle

¹⁰ Calder, Bjork, *Sources and Analogues*, 167.

¹¹ See Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 47–76 and Patrick O'Neill, “On the Date, Provenance and Relationship of the ‘Solomon and Saturn’ Dialogues,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 26 (1997): 139–65.

are portrayed as invested with power in the way that may resemble the individual runic signs as bearers of meaning. Such a reading must, perforce, be conjectural, but the references to wealth in the speeches of Saturn and Solomon are of considerable importance in the present discussion. To begin with, Saturn refers to wealth in its literal and material sense. Having studied pagan books of Libya, Greece, and India and having found no answer to his quest, he turns to King Solomon imploring him to be enlightened in the properties of the Pater Noster. For this he offers what he has most valuable, thirty gold-pieces and his twelve sons:

Sille ic þe ealle, sunu Dauides,
 þeoden Israela, XXX punda
 smætēs goldes and mine suna twelfe,
 gif þu mec gebringest þæt ic si gebryrded
 ðurh þæs cantices cwyde Cristes linan [...].

Solomon and Saturn 1, 13–17

[I will offer you, son of David,
 Lord of Israel, thirty pounds of
 pure gold and my twelve sons
 if you instruct me
 through what the canticle says of Christ's rule.]¹²

It is, perhaps, obvious that when thirty pieces of gold and twelve sons are mentioned in the context of Christ's name, it invites an anagogic reading of the above fragment which might relate to the twelve apostles of Christ and to the money paid to Judas for his future betrayal. Perhaps the key to such a reading lies in the precious metal offered in the poem – Saturn proposes gold, not the silver offered to Judas, and thus such an anagogic interpretation may be deliberately misleading. Saturn's offer of *smæte gold* "refined/purified gold" might, as a matter of fact, be an honest payment, a gift, and a sign of willingness to part with his riches in exchange for wisdom. The stress on the purity of the gold appears to

¹² Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, 31.

attest it. In this way, Saturn is about to go beyond the pagan possession of wealth in his quest for truth, all the more so that King Solomon's answer directs the understanding and the use of the wealth towards its metaphoric and spiritual sense. Solomon claims that the truth about the power of the prayer must, by itself, exceed the earthly creation made of gold and silver:

þonne him bið leofre ðonne eall ðeos leohte gesceaft,
 gegoten fram ðam grunde goldes and seolfres,
 feðersceatum full feohgestreona [...].

Solomon and Saturn I, 30–33

[then to him it must be dearer than all this bright creation,
 from the deep lying gold and silver cast out,
 full of richest wealth from the four corners of the world.]¹³

And ultimately in the symbolic transition from the material wealth to its Christian dimension Solomon resorts to the biblical metaphor wherein the words of God are likened to a treasure, glittering with gold and precious stones:

Salomon cwæð:
 Gylden is se godes cwide, gimmum astæned,
 hafað sylfren leaf; [...]

Solomon and Saturn I, 68–71a

[Solomon spoke:
 God's speech is golden, beset with gems,
 it is silver-leaved; [...]]¹⁴

Thus, it seems that the use of the concept of wealth and treasure in the first dialogue of *Solomon and Saturn* progresses from the Anglo-Saxon

¹³ Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, 32.

¹⁴ Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, 34.

goldhord “treasure hoard” to that by far more appreciated in poetry *wordhord* “treasure of words,” whose most famous example is the opening line of *Widsith*: *Widsið maðolade, wordhord onleac* [...] “Widsith has spoken [according to the craft], unlocked the treasure of words.”¹⁵ The prized *wordhord* of poetry is also indirectly positioned by the Exeter Book *Maxims I (B)* as an ornament of a people and it is related to several other things and people that are highly valuable. The poet is listed as someone who belongs to his people as much as gold to a sword, jewels to a woman, and heroes to fighting:

Gold geriseþ on guman sweorde,
 sellic sigesceorp, sinc on cwene,
 god scop gumum, garniþ werum,
 wig towiþre wicfreoþa healdan.

Maxims I (B), 125–128

[Gold becomes a man’s sword
 and as robes of victory, golden jewels to a woman,
 a good *scop* to people, a spear-battle to men,
 war in order to hold peace among dwellings.]¹⁶

A considerable part of the above examples either corresponds to or is inspired by Christian mysticism. Gregory the Great’s major work, the so-called *Magna Moralia* or, more precisely, *Moralia, sive Expositio in Job* “Morals, or the Commentary on the Book of Job” was an immensely influential text of the early Middle Ages, which, in all likelihood, contributed to the shape of Old English existentialist attitudes. Although, unlike Gregory’s other text, the *Regula pastoralis* “Pastoral Care,” it may have been too voluminous to be included in the grand translatorial scheme of King Alfred, it functioned as one of the most important texts of an age in which the sense of insecurity and numerous unpredictable afflictions were rife. In *Moralia*’s Book IV Gregory’s anagogic

¹⁵ Bernard J. Muir, ed., *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, Volume I (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1994), 241.

¹⁶ Muir, *The Exeter Anthology*, 256.

interpretation of the Book of Job focuses on the symbolic use of gold as a denotation of wisdom. Commenting on Job's lament that he would much rather be with the rulers who had gold and princes who filled their houses with silver (Job 3:15), Gregory poses a rhetorical question:

Quid vero aurum, nisis sapiential apellat? De qua per Salomonem dicitur: *Thesaurus desiderabilis requiescit in ore sapientis* (Prov. xxi, 20). Aurum nempe sapientiam vidit, quam thesaurum vocavit. Que et recte auri appellatione signatur; quia sicut auro temporalia, ita sapientia bona æterna mercantur. Si aurum sapientia non esset, nequaquam Laodiceæ Ecclesiæ ab angelo diceretur: *Suadeo tibi emere a me aurum ignitum* (Apoc. iii, 18). Aurum quippe emimus, cum accepturi sapientiam, prius obedientiam præbemus [...] (Eccles, i, 33).¹⁷

And what does he [Job] call gold, saving wisdom: of which Solomon says, "A treasure to be desired lies at rest in the mouth of the wise" (Prov. 21:20)? That is, he saw wisdom as gold, and therefore called it a treasure: and she is well designated by the name of "gold," for that, as temporal goods are purchased with gold, so are eternal blessings with wisdom. If wisdom had not been gold, it would never have been said by the Angel to the Church of Laodicea, "I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire" (Rev. 3:18). For we "buy ourselves gold," when we pay obedience first, to get wisdom in exchange [...] (Eccles. 1:26).¹⁸

Saturn's bid to exchange gold for wisdom and Solomon's description of the divine language as a golden treasure find their likely provenance in Gregory's commentary. Later, in Book XVIII of his *Moralia*, Gregory refers to gold as symbolic of wisdom when he compares the bearers of divine messages – that is, prophets Jeremiah, John, and Elijah – to *vas auri*

¹⁷ Gregorius I Magnus, *Moralium Libri Sive Expositio In Librum Beati Job*, Pars I, *Documenta Catholica Omnia*, J.P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, accessed December 1, 2013, http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0590-0604__SS_Gregorius_I_Magnus__Moralium_Libri_Sive_Expositio_In_Librum_Beati_Job_Pars_I__MLT.pdf.html.

¹⁸ Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, Book IV, Members of the English Church trans. (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844), 228.

excelsum et eminens pro sapientia commutavit,¹⁹ “vessels made of gold, high and overtopping for this Wisdom.”²⁰ Gregory thus revolves around and returns to the Book of Job’s psalm-like exhortation to the preciousness of wisdom: “coral and jasper are not worthy of mention; the price of wisdom is beyond rubies. The topaz of Cush cannot compare with it; it cannot be bought with pure gold” (Job 28:18). But even if purchasing wisdom with gold is not possible, as its value exceeds all riches, Gregory’s commentary speaks of the idea of exchange recognizable from Old English models of generosity, not only that of *Solomon and Saturn*’s dialogue, the *Rune Poem*’s statement on wealth, but also that of the Exeter Book *Maxims*, where gold is to be a gift that befits somebody else, much as the wisdom which is destined to be shared portrayed by Gregory:

[...] Maþþum oþres weorð,
gold mon sceal gifan. [...]
Maxims I (C), 154b–155a

[A precious thing becomes another,
man shall give gold.]²¹

The fragment of *Maxims* once again speaks of the need to give treasure away – we may only wonder which of the cultural paradigms was gaining the upper hand here: the pre-Christian bestowing of gift as a way of securing loyalty and position of power, or the Christian *caritas* conjoined with the distrust of material things and the pursuit of the divine grace.

The apparent Anglo-Saxon paradox, persistently reappearing in gnomic poetry and presenting the possession of wealth in combination with the need or necessity to bestow it on others may, therefore, indicate the evaluative potential associated with the gold and riches appreciated in Old English poetry. Wealth understood in this sense means that its possession

¹⁹ Gregorius I Magnus, *Moralium Sive Expositio In Librum Beati Job*, Pars II, http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0590-0604__SS_Gregorius_I_Magnus__Moralium_Libri_Sive_Expositio_In_Librum_Beati_Job__Pars_II__MLT.pdf.html.

²⁰ Gregory the Great, *Morals*, Book XVIII, 379–80.

²¹ Muir, *The Exeter Anthology*, 257.

and distribution is not only a trial of the owner's economic status. It also becomes a spiritual trial for the owner's *caritas* and a quest for wisdom. This capacity of gold to put men to the test is not so explicitly mentioned in the gnostic texts, unless, of course, we count the necessity to deal out the riches as this. However, in the historic contexts of Anglo-Saxon material culture, it would certainly be a tall order, as sharing the treasure, which is now called the Staffordshire hoard, or paying the Danegeld surely would not be considered as welcome acts of Christian charity. The evaluative power of gold, however, is mentioned explicitly in Gregory's *Moralia*, albeit not as a testing agent, but as a symbol of purification achieved after tribulation. Job's remark that he is willing to be tried by God, because after it he will come forth like gold, inspired Gregory to continue in his commentary on the metaphoric uses of gold on the path towards wisdom:

Aurem in furnace ad naturæ suæ claritatem proficit, dum sordes amittit. Quasi aurum ergo quod per ignem transit probantur animæ justorum, quibus exustione tribulationis et subtrahuntur vitia et merita augmentur. Nec elationis fuit quod sanctus vir in tribulatione se positum auro comparavit, quia qui Dei voce justusante flagella dictus est, non idcirco tentari permissus est ut in eo vitia purgarentur, sed ut meritas crescerent, aurum vero igne purgatur. Minus ergo de se æstimavit ipse quam erat, dum, tribulationi traditus, purgari se creditit, qui purgandum in se aliquid non habebat.²²

Gold in the furnace is advanced to the brightness of its nature, whilst it loses the dross. And so like "gold that passeth through the fire" the souls of the righteous are tried, which by the burning of tribulation through and through, both have their defects removed, and their good points increased. Nor was it of pride that the holy man [Job] likened himself as set in tribulation to gold, in that he who, by the voice of God, was pronounced righteous before the stroke, was not for this reason permitted to be tried that bad qualities might be cleared off, but that excellences might be heightened.²³

²² Gregorius I Magnus, *Moralium Libri*.

²³ Gregory the Great, *Moralia in the Book of Job*, Book XVI, 250.

Both Job and Gregory then refer to the gold that could be the *smæte gold* “pure gold” that Saturn offered to Solomon in line 15 of *Solomon and Saturn I*, the gold of the highest value described by an adjective derived from the verb *smiðian* “to forge,” and thus a supreme kind of substance that symbolically may bear relation to the process of striving for the truth.

Aside from the *smæte gold* of *Solomon and Saturn*, Old English gnomic poetry does not refer to gold as a vehicle of purification through fiery tribulations. However, there does exist a highly formulaic phrase which often accompanies descriptions of particularly valuable riches and which bears both a relation to Old English material culture and a meaning that allows for allegorical readings not unlike those present in Gregory’s *Moralia*. In a word, the gold that is most admired by Anglo-Saxon *scops* is the gold that is *wunden* “wound,” “twisted,” or “wrought.” The gold that brings to mind both the breathtakingly beautiful interlaced ornaments of so much of preserved Anglo-Saxon metalwork and the well-familiar sentence from *The Wanderer*: *Warað hine wræclast, nales wunden gold*²⁴ “paths of exile are for him, not at all wound gold” (l. 32). The parallel and simultaneously the disparity between the paths of exile and the interlacing patterns of the wrought gold transport the meaning of this line from the material to the immaterial world in the manner that is so characteristic of Gregory’s exegesis, of *Solomon and Saturn*’s dialogue and of the *Rune Poem*. The paths of exile are obviously externally contrasted with the notions of power, security, and pleasure that lie behind the *wunden gold*. It is, after all not ordinary bullion or coins that the poet evokes, but the gold of exquisite beauty, fit as ornament for kings or for illuminations of books such as the literally written with gold Codex Aureus of Canterbury.²⁵ And yet, in the contexts of all the preceptive statements found across a considerable body of Old English poetry, it is impossible not to think of this line as presenting precisely the paradox of the wealth which needs to be

²⁴ Muir, *The Exeter Anthology*, 219.

²⁵ The example mentioned is the so-called Stockholm Codex Aureus (Stockholm, Swedish Royal Library, MS A. 35), also known as Codex Aureus of Canterbury. See David M. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Art. From the Seventh Century to the Norman Conquest* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 94 and plate 113.

dealt away with, which was first recalled here in the *Rune Poem*. Thus, even if the path of exile is not the choice of *The Wanderer's* narrator, it is the path that discards gold, and therefore a path that is infinitely more wound and wrought than material wealth. It offers the wisdom that is only reached after tribulations familiar from the biblical allegory of gold passing through fiery furnace. And like the supreme wealth of the true wisdom it is as beautiful, serpentine, and hidden as the golden standard that Beowulf finds in the lair of the dragon:

[...] segn callgylden
 heah ofer horde, hondwundra mæst,
 gelocen leoðocræftum; [...]

Beowulf, 2767b–2769a

[a standard all of gold,
 high over the hoard, most wondrously made by hand,
 woven with the skill of hands / skill of poetry.]²⁶

The gold that is so prominently present in Old English visual and literary culture, and so important in discourses of power, undergoes a poetic transmutation in Old English gnomic verse supported by biblical exegesis. This transmutation is taking place within the power discourse belonging to the Christian *gnosis* as it is a transmutation from earthly and material supremacy to the spiritual supremacy of wisdom. In all likelihood the *Beowulf*-poet locked this meaning in the paronomasia offered by the phrase *gelocen leoðocræftum*, woven with *leoðocræft/leoðucraeft* meaning both the “skill of limbs” and the “skill of poetry.” What is then truly *wunden* – that is, wrought out of the Old English wealth, is wrought not just by skilled hands of goldsmiths, but by the wordsmiths guiding men towards wisdom more precious than jasper, rubies, and gold.

²⁶ Jack, *Beowulf*: 187.

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