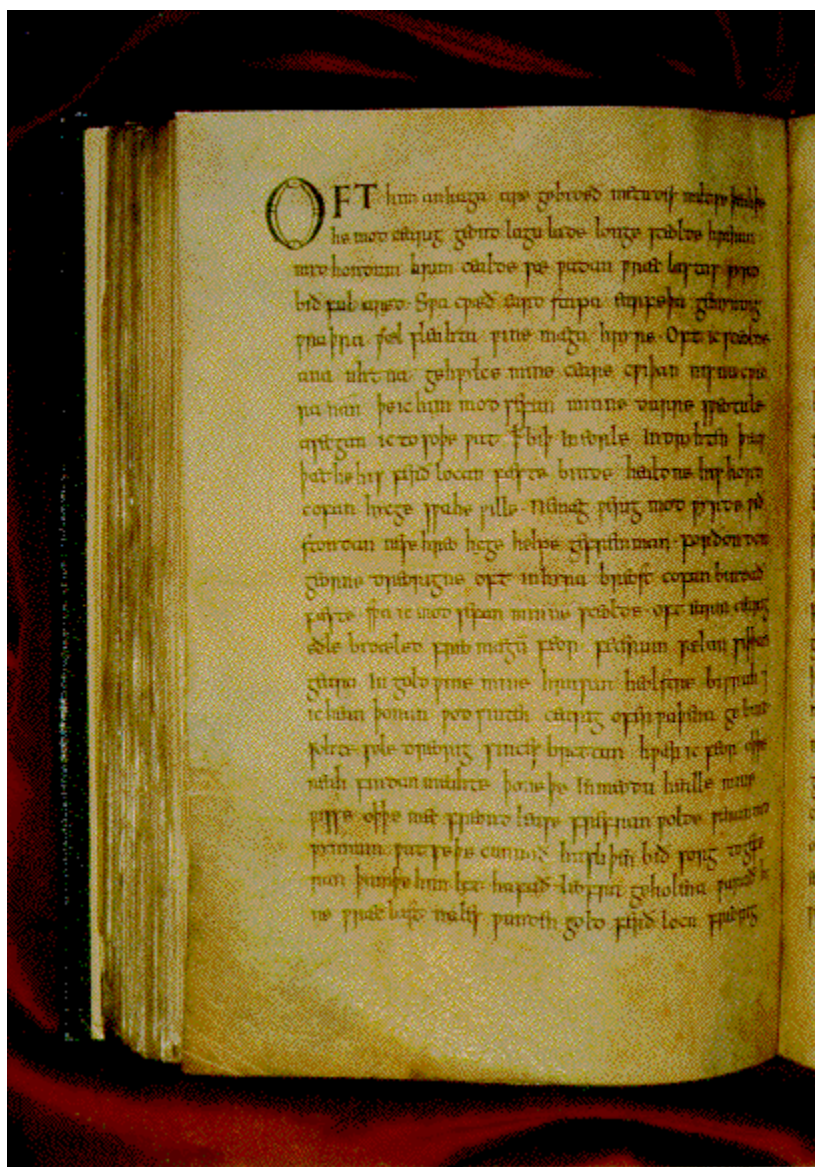


## The Exeter Book, "Wanderer," and "The Wife's Lament"

1. Before books were printed, all the literature of a region would be bound in a single volume "library." The huge book would be bound between birch boards. (Birch comes from the German name for which we get the word "book" via Old English.)
2. The great book we know as the "Exeter Book" was given to the library of Exeter Cathedral by the first bishop of Exeter who died in 1072. His will describes one great "englic boc" which scholars believe could only have been the Exeter Book because of its extraordinary size.
3. Its parchment leaves measure about 12.5 inches by 8.6 inches and the book originally probably contained a total of 131 leaves. It most likely was written by a single scribe.
4. The Exeter Book is our only surviving source for these works: "The Wanderer," "The Seafarer," "Widsith," "Wulf and Eadwacer," "The Wife's Lament," and a great collection of the witty riddles at which the Old English poets excelled.
5. The manuscript survived because the Exeter Cathedral library resided in a building which would escape the dangers of fire and storm, civil war, and two world wars. In a thousand years, the book has sustained some damage.
  - a. At one time it was possibly used as a cutting board because today we can see the birch covers have knife strokes.
  - b. Near the margin there is a triangle shape torn out of a series of pages.
  - c. There is a circular stain in the middle of the book that was possibly the mark of a beer mug. The liquid went through several pages and caused damage.
  - d. The most extensive damage comes from a long burn that has destroyed many of the pages.
7. The Exeter Book is now housed at the Exeter Cathedral Library in Exeter, England.





The opening lines of “The Wanderer.” In printed editions, the first full sentence of this page is represented this way:

Oft him anhaga    are gebideð  
metudes miltse,    þeah þe he modcaerig  
geond lagulade    longe sceode  
hreran mid hondum    hrimcaelde sæ,  
wadan wræclastas.    Wyrð biæð ful aræd!

The more sharp-eyed among you will be thinking, "Aha! There aren't any caesurae (half-line divisions) in the original manuscript, and the lines are set out like prose, not broken like poetry!" But look more closely and you'll see the scribe has left slightly larger spaces at some of the caesurae, and in others the scribe uses his only punctuation mark, the point or period, to indicate those half-line breaks. Nonetheless, doesn't this challenge, somewhat, our sense of the essential difference between poetry and prose?

The poetry in the Exeter Book's 131 surviving parchment leaves is the largest collection of Old English literature we have, in addition to the Junius MS, the Verecelli Book, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv ("Beowulf" and "Judith"), and the Paris Psalter. It appears to have been copied by a single scribe, probably in the late 10th century, though "The Wanderer" doubtless is much older, perhaps dating to the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon tribes to Christianity, which began with St. Augustine's mission to the southerners in 597. "The Wanderer's" frame narrator offers clearly Christian advice in response to the Wanderer's lament for lost worldly things. "The Wife's Lament," by contrast, seems to be at least somewhat older because it offers none of the typical Christian consolations for her despair and appears to reflect a pre-conversion, pagan attitude toward one's fate. The book contains 31 major poems, as well as 96 riddles. Of course, reading any heavily subordinated Old English poetic sentence, with its many kennings (metaphoric phrases), strangely resembles solving a riddle.

[http://faculty.goucher.edu/eng211/exeter\\_book\\_and\\_wanderer.htm](http://faculty.goucher.edu/eng211/exeter_book_and_wanderer.htm)