

New copy of earliest poem in English language discovered by Trinity researchers in Rome

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Old fashioned slivthing and the help of modern technology leads to discovery of manuscript with poem composed by a farm labourer 1,300 years ago

An early 9th century manuscript containing a text of the first known poem in the English language has been discovered in Rome by researchers from Trinity College Dublin.

The newly-discovered [manuscript](#) in the **National Central Library of Rome** of Caedmon's Hymn dates from between the years 800 and 820, making it the third-oldest surviving text of the poem.



Dr Elisabetta Magnanti and Dr Mark Faulkner with the Trinity copy of Bede's Ecclesiastical History in the library of Trinity College Dublin.

The discovery is highly significant because the Latin manuscript contains the poem in Old English in the main body of the text. The two older copies in [Cambridge](#) and [St Petersburg](#) have the poem in Latin, with the Old English text only added in the margin or at end.

The inclusion of the poem in Old English in the Rome manuscript indicates how Old English poetry was valued by Bede's readers, according to researchers from [Trinity's School of English](#).

Written over 1,300 years ago [Caedmon's Hymn](#) is a nine-line poem praising God for the creation of the world. It is said to have been composed by a cowherd from Whitby, North Yorkshire, after a divine visitation.

The poem was composed in Old English – the form of English used in the early Middle Ages. It survives today thanks to its inclusion in some copies of the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, an 8th century history of England written in Latin by [the Venerable Bede](#), a northern English monk.

The manuscript was discovered by [Dr Elisabetta Magnanti](#) and [Dr Mark Faulkner](#), [School of English](#), both experts in medieval manuscripts. Details of their discovery have been [published](#) by Cambridge University Press in the open-access journal [Early Medieval England and its Neighbours](#).

Dr Elisabetta Magnanti explained: "I came across conflicting references to Bede's history in Rome, some pointing to its existence and some indicating it was lost. When its existence was confirmed by the library and the manuscript was digitised for us, we were extremely excited to find that the manuscript contained the Old English version of Caedmon's Hymn and that it was embedded in the Latin text."

"The magic of digitisation has allowed two researchers in Ireland to recognise the significance of a manuscript now in Rome, containing a poem miraculously composed in Northern England by a shy cowherd a millennium and a half ago. This discovery is a testament to the power of libraries to facilitate new research by digitising their collections and making them freely available online."

Why is this important?

Dr Mark Faulkner said: "About three million words of Old English survive in total, but the vast majority of texts come from the tenth and eleventh centuries. Caedmon's Hymn is almost unique as a survival from the seventh century – it connects us to the earliest stages of written English. As the oldest known poem in Old English it is today celebrated as the beginning of English literature."

"Unearthing a new early medieval copy of the poem has significant implications for our understanding of Old English and how it was valued. Bede chose not to include the original Old English poem in his history, but to translate it into Latin. This manuscript shows that the original Old English poem was reinserted into the Latin within 100 years of Bede finishing his history. It is a sign of how much early readers valued English poetry."

Terrid history and complex ownership

The newly-discovered manuscript of Bede's *History* is one of at least 160 surviving copies. This manuscript was produced at the Abbey of Nonantola in Northern Central Italy between 800 and 850 and is now in the National Central Library in Rome. Its rediscovery sheds new light on the cultural connections between England and Italy in this period.

According to the researchers it has endured a torrid history – stolen from the church of San Bernardo alle Terme in Rome, where with other manuscripts it had been sent for safekeeping amid the Napoleonic Wars in the 1810s. Then it changed hands privately a number of times before being acquired by the National Central Library of Rome.

Its complex ownership history meant that the manuscript had been regarded as lost by Bede scholars since 1925 and no one realised it contained a copy of Caedmon's Hymn until the National Central Library of Rome digitised the manuscript.



[Valentino Longo](#), Curator of *Medieval and Modern Manuscripts at the National Central Library of Rome*, said: "Today, the National Central Library of Rome holds the largest collection of early medieval codices from the Benedictine abbey of Nonantola. This collection comprises 45 manuscripts dating from the sixth to the twelfth century, divided between the original Sassanian collection and the Vittorio Emanuele collection, where the manuscripts recovered following their dispersal due to the 19th-century theft have been housed. The whole Nonantolan collection has been fully digitised and is accessible through the library's website."

[Andrea Cappo](#), Head of Manuscripts and Rare Books Reading Room, [National Central Library of Rome](#), added: "The Central National Library of Rome continually expands its digital collections, providing free access to its resources; the library has already made available [digital copies of around 500 manuscripts](#), and is also completing a major project to [digitise the holdings of the National Centre for the Study of the Manuscript](#), which includes microfilm reproductions of approximately 110,000 manuscripts from 180 Italian libraries. This initiative will give scholars and researchers access to more than 40 million images."

Composed following a divine visitation

The Hymn is said to have been composed by Caedmon, an agricultural labourer working at [Whitby Abbey](#) in North Yorkshire, who was at a feast when guests began to recite poems. Embarrassed that he didn't know anything suitable, Caedmon left the feast and went to bed. A figure then appeared to him in his dreams, telling him to sing about Creation, which Caedmon miraculously did, producing his [Hymn](#), nine lines of intricately-woven poetry praising God for creating the world. [Read the poem here in English and here in Old English](#).

Continued research

"Interest in the Abbey of Nonantola has once again been stirred by this ancient copy of Caedmon's Hymn and the history of the manuscript in which it is preserved," said [Canon Dr. Riccardo Fangarezzi](#), Head of the [Abbey Archive in Nonantola, Italy](#), where the manuscript was produced.

"This newly identified gem of British cultural heritage now joins the small Anglo-Nonantolan cultural treasury constituted by manuscripts listed in early catalogues and reconstructed in more recent scholarship, from the source of the Old English poem *Saul and David*, preserved in the Nonantolan manuscript *Sess. 53*, to the diplomatic missions of our abbot Niccolò Pacciarelli to King Richard II, to mention only the most well-known examples.

"We look forward to further results arising from the dissemination of these valuable studies and from continued research. The present times may be rather dark, yet such intellectual contributions are genuine rays of sunlight: the Comment is less isolated."

**** Photo Credit: Rome, National Central Library, MS. Vitt. Em. 1452, f. 122v.**

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