STRUCTURING SPACES

ORAL POETICS AND ARCHITECTURE IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

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[A certain one is able to wondrously plan the making of all high timbers; his hand is trained, wise and skillful, as is right for the worker, to establish a hall; he knows how to securely join the wide building against sudden downfall. A certain one is able to greet the harp with hands; he possesses the cleverness of quick movements on the joy-wood. . . .]

*Gifts of Men* 44–50¹

If proverbial wisdom encapsulates widely held cultural truths, then the commentary on builders and harpists in the Old English *Gifts of Men* has much insight to offer modern readers regarding Anglo-Saxon conceptions of architecture and song and the relationship of these two art forms to one another. The *Gifts of Men* catalogues approximately thirty
skills—hunting, swimming, fighting, singing, sailing, riding, learning, writing, and many more, each distinguished as a valued “gift” from God—in seemingly random patterns of order and inclusion. What these otherwise disparate skills do have in common, though, is the unambiguous respect of the poet; all are sundorgiefe, “gifts apart,” worthy of utmost admiration, and especially prominent among the itemized crafts are those related to performance and architectonics, themes to which the poet returns repeatedly. Most of the poem’s gifts are treated only one time each, often in as little as a single half-line; skills in oral or musical performance, however, receive of the relatively brief poem’s lines, and skills in architectural prowess receive , suggesting a heightened awareness of the value of these particular art forms.

While the poem’s typical Anglo-Saxon paratactic style ultimately leaves to its audience the task of discerning the actual relationships of these crafts to one another, the immediate juxtaposition of musical performance to architecture in lines invites further speculation. In addition to the privilege of extended treatment, both of these gifts are presented as performative in nature. The portrayal of building syntactically parallels that of a harpist’s performance, and, most notably, the mental planning of such building is depicted as concurrent with the act of physical execution. Rather than an architect designing a structure to be built later by others possessing gifts of construction, design and execution are instead presented as complementary aspects of a single gift. The craftsman able to plan (ahycgan) a building possesses hands that are “gelaered, wis ond gewealden” [“trained, wise and skillful”] (45–46), and thus it is said to be “wyrhtan ryht, sele asettan” [“right for the worker, to build a hall”] (46–47). Such a combination of planning and building is striking because the overarching concern of this poem lies in its isolation of the various gifts scattered by God among men, leading us to expect that skills would be stratified to the extent that they were conceived of as being separable.

The conflation of architectural design and execution in the builder’s gift is then immediately followed by a similar description of the harpist’s craft. At a very basic level, the builder’s hands constructing with wooden timbers (timbra) are paralleled by the harpist’s hands striking his instrument—also made of wood (beam). Further, both crafts are characterized by interrelated physical skill and mental knowledge, traits that
in each case are linked explicitly in the craftsman’s hands. Like the builder’s “wise” (wis) hands, the harpist’s hands have physical dexterity resulting from mental acuity, list. The physical skill required for artistic production and the mental knowledge necessary for composition could have been presented separately by the poet, as occurs in other works of a similar nature,7 but here they are put forth as being inextricable. In building as in music and poetry, planning and production occur together in time and space, gnomic wisdom here demonstrating a fundamental conception of architecture, not as preconceived plans leading to the subsequent creation of static artifacts, but as dynamic and responsive acts of composition in performance.8

The juxtaposition of and parallels between these arts are especially noteworthy as they are included in the format of a catalogue, a form characterized by lists or inventories but providing “a more comprehensive exposition of its subject” and suggesting “the interrelations among the various aspects of the subject” (Howe, Old English Catalogue 21). As Nicholas Howe observes for the Gifts of Men and catalogue poetry more generally, even an “accidental” arrangement of items in a given list can nonetheless be “suggestive” (111). As wisdom poetry, catalogues such as the Gifts of Men can be understood to present truths and organizational logic that would be most conventional and thus most obvious to an Anglo-Saxon audience. As we shall see, this didactic wisdom conveyed through the similar portrayals of performers and builders is also corroborated by less obvious connections found throughout the poetic corpus more widely.

The linking of verbal and material art forms through their performative aspects has profound and far-reaching implications for the reading of Old English poetry today. The present study argues that throughout the corpus of Old English poetry the skills of the builder and the poet intersect in many complex and often unexpected ways, with their respective crafts drawing demonstrably from many of the same traditionally encoded motifs and images. Through patterns of repeated use, building characteristics—as well as the phraseology used to describe these characteristics in verse—develop powerful associative meanings for verbal and material craftsmen, as well as for their respective audiences. Such connections are neither simple nor straightforward and require careful attention to historical, social, linguistic, and generic contexts alike. First,
then, let us turn to an exploration of what constitutes “architecture” on the Anglo-Saxon landscape and in Old English verse.

DEFINING THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Even the scant survivals from the Anglo-Saxon architectural landscape give us some small sense of the varied structures that would have informed poetic descriptions of built space and their reception by Anglo-Saxon audiences. Prehistoric underground dwellings can still be found in Cornwall and along England’s northern borders. Later, four hundred years of Roman rule left an impressive legacy on the landscape, and the Anglo-Saxons inherited much from this period both in building materials and in inspiration for the literary imagination. The Anglo-Saxons themselves built primarily from wood, though they used stone to a limited extent, especially in ecclesiastical structures later in the period. They incorporated into their buildings elements from Scandinavian, Celtic, Roman, and other traditions, often synthesizing features from multiple styles. They also often built these structures on Roman and Celtic sites and sometimes reused Roman stones, making it impossible to pin down any monolithic Anglo-Saxon style or to separate that which is unequivocally Anglo-Saxon from the rest of the surrounding landscape. The fluid and evolving sense of space that resulted in Anglo-Saxon building practice is in turn often reflected in the Old English poetic vocabulary itself.

As is true for many cognitive categories, the Anglo-Saxons did not have a term equivalent to our concept of architecture for denoting built space. This lack of correspondence is not surprising given that the word architecture itself developed in the very different cultural context of the seventeenth century from architect, a term that had the elite sense of “master builder” for more than a hundred years before any more general sense of building applied. In contrast to this primary historical sense of “architecture,” which implicitly focuses our attention on artist and product, Anglo-Saxon terms related to building tended to emphasize neither the individual designer nor the individual structure but rather the function to which built space was put and how such spaces were perceived, a conception of space much closer to the performative model seen in the Gifts of Men. Old English burh is a very common and widely encompass-
ing term applied to built constructions and is among the closest equivalents to modern senses of “architecture”;\textsuperscript{12} however, \textit{burh}’s multivalence reflects a distinctively Anglo-Saxon sense of space and demonstrates the need for a more expansive and reception-oriented model of “architecture” than the modern English vocabulary readily provides.

\textit{Burh}’s primary sense is that of an individual structure, “fortified enclosure” or “fortified dwelling,” with a secondary and more generalized sense of a “fortified town” or “city.”\textsuperscript{13} As is typical with Old English vocabulary, greater specificity under this very general rubric is obtained largely through compounding, with \textit{burh} occurring far more frequently in compounds than in isolation.\textsuperscript{14} While \textit{burh} compounds can and do delimit certain aspects of meaning such as function or location, these compounds, like \textit{burh} itself, are ambiguous as to whether their specific referents are individual structures, building complexes, or even entire cities. \textit{Burh-bot}, for instance, can refer to the maintenance of an individual “fortification” or to an entire “town”; likewise, \textit{burh-weg} can mean either a general city road or a road leading to an individual building.\textsuperscript{15}

Despite the vast range of meaning, what all concepts associated with \textit{burh} share is a notion of built space in relation to its physical environment.\textsuperscript{16} However, that space need be neither permanent nor detached from natural objects or materials, conditions that are commonly assumed in modern conceptions of architecture. While \textit{burh} does unequivocally denote manipulation of materials in construction for human use (or for the use of personified objects, as in the case of some Exeter Book riddles),\textsuperscript{17} the term does not exclude natural elements that interact with or function as built space, and \textit{burh} can be used in reference to earthen mounds surrounding a city or hills on which cities and buildings are built.\textsuperscript{18} The modern term \textit{architecture}, of course, can also have broader senses overlapping with those here described for \textit{burh} in the Anglo-Saxon period, but to most productively apply it to Anglo-Saxon practice a broadened awareness and a shift in emphasis are needed.

Another difficulty in understanding Anglo-Saxon building processes is that, as the example of \textit{burh} illustrates, description of Old English architecture, especially in poetry, is most often characterized by a potentially frustrating lack of specificity. Even the most descriptive architectural terms frequently have numerous referents, conflating nature, buildings, and even human emotions\textsuperscript{19} without maintaining clear-cut delineation.\textsuperscript{20}
Terms for the buildings themselves follow similar patterns, *sele* referring to a modest “house,” a grander “hall,” or simply a generic “dwelling,” and *ræced* likewise denoting structures as varied as “house,” “hall,” or “palace.”21 Further, in Old English poetry terms applied to buildings do not always differentiate natural from man-made structures, nor do they distinguish permanent from temporary. Such ranges of meaning in many descriptive words are certainly familiar to speakers of modern English as well, but it is generally the *only* type of description we are given during this period, with no “truly detailed descriptions” appearing until the twelfth century (Pickles 11). Indeed, “relatively few words among the many for dwelling and dwelling places seem clearly to relate to concrete structures” (Grundy and Roberts 102). The multivalence and ambiguity of architecturally descriptive terminology in Old English verse impede in many ways our modern ability to mentally process the verbal images provided, but often what we lose in visual detail we may gain in associative meaning. Or, as Lynne Grundy and Jane Roberts have put it, Old English poetic vocabulary, “notoriously opaque in reference,” is “connotative rather than narrowly denotative” (102).

In the end, though this study is devoted to representations of “architecture,” it also investigates a great number of structures that might seem architecturally ephemeral by some definitions. Accordingly, this exploration of Anglo-Saxon architecture as represented in surviving poetry examines built spaces and their descriptions sharing common phraseology and important associative meanings regardless of their position within conventional classification schemes or sometimes anachronistic categories. Across the spectrum of Old English poetry, ancient ruins, temporary military tents, Christian churches, heroic halls, and even nests or fox holes are described through common modes of poetic expression, often necessitating a shift in widely accepted cognitive categories for modern-day readers. The present study seeks to explore these imagined spaces and their real-world counterparts on the Anglo-Saxon landscape through a dual focus on architectonics and traditional verse. But in order to fine-tune this perspective, we will first turn to the theoretical frameworks that offer especially helpful methodologies for this type of analysis, specifically, those approaches found within the widely divergent fields of vernacular architecture and oral theory.
ANGLO-SAXON VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

Since Old English poetry does not sharply delineate among most kinds of built spaces, analysis of its architectural description requires an equally flexible conception of architecture in general, and here we can draw extensively from relevant work in vernacular architecture, a field interested in the “ethnographic” quality of buildings (Carter and Cromley xviii) and thus in keeping with the more performative model of building evidenced in the Gifts of Men and elsewhere in Old English poetry. With origins dating to the nineteenth century, studies in vernacular architecture have been characterized by a highly productive disciplinary inclusiveness. As a field of inquiry, it has both influenced and been influenced by theories and methodologies from not only architecture and architectural history but also folklore, anthropology, sociology, cultural geography, material culture, women’s studies, archaeology, urban studies, and social history. In the United States in particular, the impact of vernacular architecture has been especially strong, affecting not only analytical studies but choices in design, preservation, policy planning, and curriculum development across the country.22 The field’s characteristic inclusivity extends to its subject matter as well, with studies in vernacular architecture addressing “individual buildings, assemblages of such buildings, and entire architectural landscapes” (Carter and Cromley xiv). As the name “vernacular” implies, the field seeks to understand each building tradition in its own cultural terms, and it is this open-ended and tradition-specific perspective that pertains most directly to this study.23 As Camille Wells explained in Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture II, vernacular architecture denotes “less a kind of building than an approach to looking at buildings” (4; original emphasis).24 Though models of vernacular architecture have been most notable in North American research and have seen very little direct application in medieval studies, the present work seeks to demonstrate not only the validity but also the necessity, of employing parallel approaches in understanding both the actual and the imagined spaces of Anglo-Saxon England.

It is important to note from the outset that neither the broader field of vernacular architecture nor my application to Anglo-Saxon buildings is limited to the study of “rustic” structures divorced from what might be
considered high style or elite constructions. Such delineation would be lethal to any comprehensive treatment of Anglo-Saxon building practices and perceptions for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that the very nature of the surviving archaeological and poetic record would seem automatically to privilege the less “ordinary.” The buildings that survive to the present day are made almost exclusively of stone, a costlier building material and one associated more closely with Latin learning than with Germanic tradition. Likewise, the textual evidence that survives from the period deals much more with grand Anglo-Saxon halls than with “everyday” dwellings. Perhaps most important, any such division based on perceived commonness or lack of refinement risks creating classifications inapplicable to architecture, as depictions in surviving Old English verse not uncommonly employ similar phraseology to describe structures as divergent as a king’s hall, a modest church, an underground prison, or, for that matter, an earthen grave. The more fluid parameters of vernacular architecture also encourage and validate the study of “important and overlooked properties of impermanent architecture—structures designed for immediate and usually transitory functions” (Wells, “Introduction” 6). This kind of expansion of what might typically be understood as architecture is very important in the present study, which treats impermanent architecture, such as camp tents and the elusive “burgeteld” in Judith, alongside more permanent halls and dwellings.

The chapters that follow thus avoid classification on aesthetic or functional grounds and instead examine the spectrum of architectural description on its own terms as it presents itself in the surviving manuscripts and against the context of the built environment as experienced during the Anglo-Saxon period, a goal well served by approaches from vernacular architecture. Characterized by “an aversion to define,” a “growing reluctance to embark on classificatory schemes,” and a “permissive approach” (Carter and Herman, “Introduction” 3), the field of vernacular architecture not only allows for but also is actually defined by an emergent and dynamic process of inquiry. In keeping with this concept of vernacular architecture, I am not interested in demarcating elite from common, man-made from natural, temporary from permanent, or even Anglo-Saxon from non-Anglo-Saxon but rather in examining the range of built spaces depicted in Old English poetry in relation to one another, to the larger built environment, and to their poetic and traditional contexts.
OLD ENGLISH ORAL POETICS

This book works from the premise that the built landscape and contemporary verse were produced alongside and informed by many of the same social, political, and cultural factors, and it examines the implications of these and related connections. An examination of built space across the spectrum of Old English poetry shows how the complex and dynamic nature of Anglo-Saxon cultural identity emerges powerfully through built and imagined spaces alike. However, the correspondences are far from tidy, one-to-one representations. Old English poetry includes references to numerous buildings whose architectural features would never have existed together on the actual landscape and, in some cases, that would have been structural impossibilities. Old English poetry also gives specific architectural description to imagined spaces altogether outside the human realm. It includes architectural metaphors that do not work at a strictly literal level. And buildings appear in translated works that depart radically from the sources they adapt. While a fluid concept of architecture—one that encompasses everything within the built environment as it was perceived in the Anglo-Saxon world, however far removed such structures might be from modern and conventional concepts of architecture—allows us to see connections across a wider range of built space, it takes us only part of the way toward understanding how descriptions of space function within Old English poetry in particular. How do we interpret repeated phraseology across the body of poetic architectural description? How do we account for seeming mistakes and inconsistencies in the use of poetic architectural imagery? For these questions, it is important to look beyond archaeological evidence and architectural possibilities and view poetic architectural description from the perspective of the surrounding oral traditional context.

Architectural description as it is present in Old English verse relies equally on the physical reality of the architectural landscape and on an oral poetics that invests such descriptions with associative meanings, a phenomenon that is perhaps most apparent at points where architectural description seems to diverge from physical and material realities of the period. By “oral poetics,” I refer to the “powerful, supple, and highly associative expressive economy” that “enables poets efficiently to bring worlds of traditional meaning(s) to their narratives by deploying a vast array of
compositional devices, some as small and highly tradition specific as a single lexeme or phrase and others as large and widely shared among discrete traditions as story patterns” (Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition* xvi).28 There is no need here to posit an unambiguously oral provenance for any of the works discussed, especially given the complex relationships linking oral and literate cultures of the Anglo-Saxon period in what has been discussed productively in terms of an “oral-literate nexus” where the interplay between the Latin and the vernacular resulted in a “diglossic character of life in medieval England” with many types and degrees of literacy contributing to Anglo-Saxon textual culture (Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition* 15). Individuals in such a society used oral traditions and literary texts in a range of complex and often interrelated ways, and it would be irresponsible to reduce this reality to a simplistic process of evolution from a pure oral state to a literate one. Rather, the two modes of communication can be seen as working together and alongside one another in dynamic and ever-changing ways.29

“Oral” as it appears in this work thus necessarily refers to the “oral-influenced,” “oral-derived,” or “oral-connected” natures of texts produced in an era of newly emerging literacy, that is, works of verbal art that “employ the idiom of oral tradition and assume an audience fluent in that idiom” (Foley, *Homer’s Traditional Art* xiv). The analysis offered here follows the line of thinking that “at some early point, verse in Old English was oral. From the time that Old English was first written, however, composition of verse in writing may be defined as ‘literate’ but only in a seriously restricted sense” (O’Brien O’Keeffe, *Visible Song* ix). It would be mistaken to project onto the Anglo-Saxons notions of twentieth- and twenty-first-century literacy, and the most productive discussions of Old English literature have instead allowed for the likelihood of numerous transitional states between the polarized extremes of pure “orality” and pure “literacy.”30 During a state of what Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe has termed “transitional literacy,” Old English poets—as well as scribes and translators—continued to operate according to the modes of an oral traditional society, and, as a result, the written poetry that we have exhibits many features of a “residual orality” (*Visible Song* x). In turn, as John Miles Foley has persuasively argued, any text employing such features “promotes—and its readership continues—a tradition of reception”
(Singer of Tales in Performance 137). The present work examines this oral-derived nature of Old English poetry—and its reciprocal tradition of reception—specifically as manifest in poetic depictions of architecture.

Because so little can be said with any certainty about the oral composition of Old English verse, this work concentrates more directly on aspects of reception, specifically, how audiences contemporary with the poetry being produced—audiences aware of and familiar with an ambient oral tradition—would have been likely to receive and interpret architectural phraseology and imagery in poetic contexts. My method throughout this study has been to work outward from individual lexemes, phrases, and clusters of images that are repeated in various architectural descriptions with an eye toward narrative and associative contexts that are shared across recurrent usages. The goal of this approach is to come to a clearer understanding of a given verbal unit’s “traditional referentiality,” what Foley defines as “the resonance between the singular moment and the traditional context” (Homer’s Traditional Art 23). Through traditional referentiality, “value-added phrases, scenes, and other patterns resonate in a network of signification, with the singular instance dwarfed—but implicitly informed—by the whole” (23). Awareness of this traditional referentiality puts us in a much better position to adopt the role of “audience” in this complex and reciprocal exchange between verbal performance and interpretation.

This concept of traditional referentiality can be extended to architecture through its pertinence to spatial concerns. In oral tradition studies, the physicality of poetic space has been addressed through the concept of a “performance arena,” a phrase Foley has used to designate “the ‘place’ that performer/author and audience go to compose and receive a given work” (Homer’s Traditional Art 23). In a living oral tradition, such a space would most likely constitute a shared location, a physical connection between performer and audience that cannot be assumed with a printed text. Though the dynamic is in obvious ways a very different one, “there is no wholesale dislocation when the performance arena changes from a ‘real’ site to a rhetorically induced forum in a text. The performer-audience relationship is no longer face-to-face, but it rhetorically recalls the same arena because it mirrors the same event” (Foley, Singer of Tales in Performance 23).
This performance model, with its implication of shared space, underscores the reciprocal relationship between performer and audience. The audience, through repeated experience within a given performance arena, can recognize and interpret traditional referentiality that is often otherwise elusive. In the case of Old English poetry, the often uncontextualized formulas and themes repeated throughout the body of verse suggest audiences who share an understanding of an idiomatic language, a language whose meanings are not always readily discernible to modern readers but that are likely nonetheless to have been highly resonant for readers and listeners contemporary with the poetry’s production. Similarly, architectural spaces can be defined not only by actions that happen within them and by their features of construction but also by the connotative power that helps to determine the way they are experienced. These concepts of built space and oral poetics overlap when we consider that the poet describing physical space must also and necessarily enter a specialized poetic space, one that relies equally on audience familiarity with verbal and architectural art forms.

In extending relevant concepts from oral theory beyond the verbal realm, I argue that Anglo-Saxon architecture and Old English poetry share a common vernacular and that these connections were likely to have been recognized and appreciated by contemporary audiences. The concept of tradition put forth here is not a monolithic one, however. The complex interface of orality and literacy during the medieval period is characterized by many and varied cultural traditions exerting influence on the production of texts and buildings alike. Even during the rise of vernacular literacy, early medieval composition and reception were highly dynamic processes, neither confined by the rigidity of a fixed text nor limited to any single cultural ideology.

MORE THAN A METAPHOR: TOWARD AN ANGLO-SAXON ARCHITECTURAL POETICS

Archaeological and textual evidence indicates that Anglo-Saxon architecture operated according to parallel principles, existing neither as the visions of single, solitary individuals nor as slavish copies. Much like the
poetry of the time period, the architecture of early medieval England demonstrates a powerful syncretism of cultural traditions, innovation within limits, and reliance on traditional associations. Like the Old English poetry that seamlessly and unapologetically merges Germanic and Christian traditions, many surviving Anglo-Saxon churches employ what today would be seen as inconsistent architectural styles and methods from various sources. The church of St. John’s at Escomb (fig. 20) follows the basic plan of Anglo-Saxon buildings but does so with stones excavated from Roman ruins; the more elaborate monastery at Reculver at Kent incorporates Roman stones into its structure and does so within the walls of the original Roman site. As Eric Fernie has noted, the “buildings erected by and for the Anglo-Saxons” cannot be easily grouped together as representing a single, independent style (Architecture of the Anglo-Saxons 10). Anglo-Saxon audiences of the poems would have been accustomed to syntheses of traditions and familiar with the buildings that were constructed on similar principles. What remains is for us to better understand the precise nature of these implied connections.

But while the specific connections between architectural and poetic arts that underlie the present study have not before been fully explored, metaphors equating oral poetry and architecture are long-standing, appearing frequently in studies of both oral poetry and vernacular architecture. Keith Bosley’s explanation of oral composition as it relates to the Finnish Kalevala includes a vivid architectural metaphor: “A bard’s repertoire can be compared with what one uses to build a garden wall — bricks, mortar, and a length of string to guide the builder. The bricks are the ‘formulas’. . . . [T]hey may be whole or half bricks, chunks of stone, pebbles, flints, shards. The mortar is the bard’s powers of invention: here, where the bricks are regular, only a thin layer is needed; there more is needed, in which to set the awkward pieces” (xxvi). Such metaphors have had a long history in oral-formulaic theory, with Albert Lord frequently discussing the units of meaning employed in oral composition in architectural terms, as he described the process of laying a “foundation” (78), “building” a theme (92), and adding to a formulaic composition with “ornamental” motifs (89). And applying the metaphor to Old English formulaic verse more specifically, Robert Payson Creed refers to words and phrases in Beowulf’s prosody as “the building blocks of the poet’s composition”
(“How” 215). These metaphors, however, tend to focus on the compositional aspect of oral performance and are in this sense potentially limiting. Therefore, in an effort to shift scholarly focus away from composition toward transmission, reception, and the dynamic exchange between performer and audience, Foley offers the metaphor of language as a replacement for architectural imagery in describing the register of South Slavic traditional verse when he writes, “Precisely because it is a language, and not a handy compositional kit of readymade building blocks, the guslar’s performance style is subject to expectable avenues of differentiation one encounters with any language” (“Performance of Homeric Epic”). In other words, nuanced meanings are created through subtle manipulation of formulaic phraseology, and thus repeated formulas and themes are never merely building blocks.

Neither, of course, are actual architectural structures themselves simple accumulations of similar building blocks in the material world. As those utilizing built space employ and encounter specific materials and features across a range of social contexts, patterns of form and function inevitably emerge; thus, over time, certain types of structures become invested with powerful connotative meanings in specific cultural contexts. And just as scholars of oral tradition have turned to building metaphors to convey the functionality and economy of orally composed verse, those working with architecture repeatedly choose metaphors of poetry and oral tradition to convey the more aesthetic and creative aspects of building with traditional materials. Henry Glassie, for instance, counters notions of the mundane in vernacular architecture by observing that “buildings, like poems and rituals, realize culture” (Vernacular Architecture 17). Jean Baudrillard also observes that “at some point, architecture is like poetry” (Baudrillard and Nouvel 66). And James Warfield’s 2005 exhibition at the University of Illinois featuring stone vernacular architecture from various regions of the world exemplified these cross-disciplinary connections in its very title: Stone Poems.39 Further, the interchangeability of architecture and verbal art as referent and analogical equivalent—or, more precisely, the metaphor’s tenor and vehicle—indicates that the parallels are not purely superficial. Such metaphors are frequently employed because they are effective, and this effectiveness exists because the underlying connections between the two art forms are indeed real and tangible.40
As the above examples illustrate, metaphors linking oral and oral-connected poetry with architecture can be employed in myriad ways. But the connections explored in the present study are best reflected in R. M. Liuzza’s more nuanced architectural metaphor to explain *Beowulf’s* complex position “between song and text”: “Like an Anglo-Saxon church made from the salvaged stones of a Roman temple, the structure of *Beowulf* may reveal complex layers of source and context; built perhaps by many hands over many years but according to an ancient plan and with a single purpose, it is unified by use and time rather than pre-formed design” (*Beowulf* 31). I seek here to explore the underlying connections that give this and related metaphors such force and to examine the wider implications for our reading of Anglo-Saxon architecture as it is depicted in Old English poetry. By taking advantage of developments in vernacular architecture, oral theory, and medieval studies more widely, a reexamination of architecture in Anglo-Saxon poetry through a more comprehensive and thoroughly contextualized approach becomes possible. *Beowulf*’s Heorot, of course, has been previously and quite extensively examined for architectural and archaeological accuracy,41 as has the structure described in *The Ruin.*42 Less attention, however, has been paid to the prisons in *Juliana* and *Andreas,* Judith’s “burgeteld,” the “feldhus” of the *Exodus,* or the elaborately described architecture of hell in *Christ and Satan.* Important, too, are architectural metaphors in such poems as *Christ I,* a charm against wens, and the maxims. These images cross boundaries of religion, function, and genre; taken together, though, they give us a more complete picture of how buildings were perceived and used to create meaning in Old English poetic contexts.

Chapter 2 thus begins my investigation by examining the traditional associations inherent in building materials used and seen by the Anglo-Saxons, that is, the actual wood, stone, and earth. Particular attention is given here to such connotations as found in the epic *Beowulf* both because it exhibits a large variety of architectural structures and because it has previously received by far the greatest attention in terms of its architectural descriptions’ correspondence to the archaeological record. Central to this chapter’s argument is that Heorot’s idealized descriptions establish a correspondence between *comitatus* ideals of heroism and specific building features (most notably, timber construction, height, elevated location,
prominent gables, and arched structures), connections that are then evoked—and sometimes subverted—in subsequent architectural descriptions within the poem. From the famous wooden hall of Heorot to the subterranean abode of Grendel’s kin beneath the mere to the stone and earth construction of the dragon’s lair and even to Beowulf’s memorial monument, Beowulf employs numerous architectural images to evoke important traditional associations for Anglo-Saxon audiences, which can in turn help us understand elements in the description of other structures in such generically divergent poems as The Ruin, Christ, and Andreas.

Chapter 3 then focuses exclusively on depictions of structures even further removed from the actual Anglo-Saxon landscape, especially those found in poems translated or adapted from known Greek and Latin sources. Buildings as varied as dedicated prisons, biblical tents and pavilions, the architectural structures of hell, and legendary temples appear frequently across a wide range of texts and genres, including the Old English Andreas, Judith, Daniel, Christ, Elene, Genesis, Exodus, and Juliana, and these structures that were drawn from other cultures and traditions often posed interesting challenges for translators. Examining thematic and phraseological patterns in the adaptation of foreign or otherwise unfamiliar buildings can help us understand more precisely how Anglo-Saxon poets recast built spaces into the oral traditional register and also how given images might be best interpreted, not solely in a literal sense, but in terms of their connotative and associative meanings. The treatment of these more unusual structures thus often provides helpful insights into Anglo-Saxon perceptions of various building types and in turn also aids our interpretation of the poems as a whole.

Chapter 4 continues the inquiry by exploring the metonymic meanings underlying a number of figurative uses of architecture in Old English poetry, including an extended and highly technical metaphor in the first of the Advent Lyrics (Christ I) of Christ as the cornerstone, the formation of the bird’s dwelling in The Phoenix, the many architectural metaphors in the Exeter Book riddles, and even a healing charm against wens that demands a swelling to shrink “as muck in a wall.” Across this diversity in terms of genre is a unity in architectural expression, and examining these and other figurative images in light of actual architectural practices and in the context of more literal poetic architectural description puts us in a much better position to understand precisely what ar-
Chapter 5 looks more closely at the role of architectural description in interpreting the past and negotiating multiple layers of cultural history as well as personal memory. The body of poems in the Exeter Book manuscript known collectively as “elegies” draws especially heavily on architectural imagery with their numerous descriptions of life in idealized Anglo-Saxon halls as well as ruminations on the former glories of ancient stone ruins. A number of cruxes in interpretation of these poems result from seeming inconsistencies between poetic descriptions (sometimes highly technical) and archaeological evidence. During the past century, for instance, lack of archaeological correspondences with the highly technical descriptions in *The Ruin* have led scholars to place the described ruins in such divergent locations as Bath, Babylon, Hadrian’s Wall, and Chester, none of these locations entirely satisfactory from an archaeological perspective. Adding to such speculation the perspective of the surrounding oral tradition, however, explains apparent contradictions in this poem as well as images in other elegies, such as the wall in *The Wanderer*, the “earth-hall” of *The Wife’s Lament*, and even elegiac passages embedded in longer narrative works such as *Beowulf*.

Chapter 6 is the first of two chapters that explore continuations and developments of building practices beyond the Anglo-Saxon period into post-Conquest England, examining first the programmatic replacement of Anglo-Saxon spaces with Anglo-Norman cathedrals and castles, then the subtle persistence of Anglo-Saxon architectural practices in the midst of such radical changes, and finally the implications of the emergent Norman architecture on early Middle English verse still to some extent reliant on Old English oral poetics, with special attention given to the verse *Brut*. Extending this discussion of dual oral and literate influences on the production of verse, chapter 7 examines poetic architectural description found in later Middle English narrative verse, specifically, *King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Sir Orfeo*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Just as Anglo-Norman builders continued to employ certain methods of Anglo-Saxon construction in their work, these later medieval texts all share thematic and, to a lesser extent, phraseological modes of description with Old English poetry in their depictions of built space. The pervasiveness of traditional architectural and poetic features during a time of such
marked changes attests to the continuing resonance of Old English oral poetics amid numerous other architectural and literary influences during the Anglo-Norman period. Thus it is that, to various degrees and in different ways, architectural descriptions in these works serve to negotiate complex issues of social class, to develop characterization of buildings’ inhabitants, and to subtly shape audience response to narrative events. Finally, a brief afterword explores ways modern audiences encounter actual and fictionalized Anglo-Saxon spaces, both in surviving parish churches scattered across England and in modern media disseminated to a global audience. Special attention is given to those specific architectural features that were charged with associative meaning in Anglo-Saxon times and that continue to resonate even today.

Included in this book is a collection of images presenting pre-Anglo-Saxon structures that helped inspire the Old English poetic imagination, surviving churches built by the Anglo-Saxons themselves, modern reconstructions of Anglo-Saxon architecture based on archaeological excavations, representations of architecture in Anglo-Saxon sculpture, and later medieval structures that demonstrate a persistence of Anglo-Saxon architectural aesthetics into the post-Conquest period. Individually, these images illustrate numerous points throughout the text. But taken together, they provide a visual overview of the Anglo-Saxon architectural landscape and its later developments, providing a visual context that brings us at least somewhat closer to the experience of an Anglo-Saxon audience and enables us to more productively understand and interpret architectural imagery in surviving verse. Let us now begin with the Anglo-Saxon buildings themselves and the meanings with which Old English oral traditions invested them.