Wondrously linked the framework with iron bonds.
The public halls were bright, with lofty gables,
Bath-houses many; great the cheerful noise,
And many mead-halls filled with human pleasures.
Till mighty fate brought change upon it all.
Slaughter was widespread, pestilence was rife,
And death took all those valiant men away.
The martial halls became deserted places,
The city crumbled, its repairers fell,
Its armies to the earth. And so these halls
Are empty, and this red curved roof now sheds
Its tiles, decay has brought it to the ground,
Smashed it to piles of rubble, where long since
A host of heroes, glorious, gold-adorned,
Gleaming in splendor, proud and flushed with wine,
Shone in their armor, gazed on gems and treasure,
On silver, riches, wealth, and jewelry,
On this bright city with its wide domains.
Stone buildings stood, and the hot steam cast forth
Wide sprays of water, which a wall enclosed
In its bright compass, where convenient
Stood hot baths ready for them at the centre.
Hot streams poured forth over the clear grey stone,
To the round pool and down into the baths.

RIDDLES

"*Saga hwæt ic hatte*" ("Say what I am called") is a frequently repeated imperative in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon riddles. The Exeter Book (ca. 975) not only contains moving elegiac poems, such as *The Wanderer* (pp. 118–21), *The Wife's Lament* (pp. 123–25), and *Wulf and Eadwacer* (pp. 121–23), but also a striking collection of ninety or so riddles. Like the elegies, the riddles are conveyed by first-person narrators, and, also like the elegies, they refuse to disclose the full conditions of their utterance. Whereas that refusal produces an emotional charge in the elegies, in the riddles it produces an intriguing and cognitive challenge.

The Anglo-Saxon riddles are clearly related to a learned Latin tradition of enigmas (*aenigmata*). Even if their subject matter is derived from the empirical world of natural phenomena, of everyday objects and animals, they provoke subtle interpretive challenges that defamiliarize the everyday world. When a poem fails to supply the crucial term of recognition ("what I am") around which understanding rapidly organizes perception, then every feature of the familiar becomes suddenly fascinating. Outworn metaphors spring into rich conceptual life; that which is regarded as purely conceptual is returned to its material condition; the everyday event becomes a wonder; comedy leaps unexpectedly forth from a revitalized account of the humdrum. Things and creatures disclose their mysterious and layered life in the world.

The Riddles[1]

Riddle 1

My beak points downwards, and I travel low
And dig along the ground, move forward as
The wood's old foe propels me; and my lord
And guardian walks stooping at my tail,
Pushes and moves and drives me on the field,
Sows in my track. I sniff along the ground,
Brought from the forest, firmly bound, and borne
Upon the wagon; I have many wonders.
And as I move on one side there is green
And my clear track is dark upon the other.
A well-made point is driven through my back
And hangs beneath, and through my head another,
Firm, pointing forwards; what my teeth tear up
Falls down beside me, if he serves me well
Who, as my lord, controls me from behind.[2]

Riddle 2

Some enemy deprived me of my life
And took away my worldly strength, then wet me,
Dipped me in water, took me out again,
Set me in sunshine, where I quickly lost
The hairs I had. Later the knife's hard edge
Cut me with all impurities ground off.
Then fingers folded me; the bird's fine raiment
Traced often over me with useful drops
Across my brown domain, swallowed the tree-dye
Mixed up with water, stepped on me again
Leaving dark tracks. The hero clothed me then
With boards to guard me, stretched hide over me,
Decked me with gold; and thus the splendid work
Of smiths, with wire bound round, embellished me.
Now my red dye and all my decorations,
My gorgeous trappings far and wide proclaim
The Lord of Hosts, not grief for foolish sins.
If sons of men will make good use of me,
By that they shall be sounder, more victorious,
Their hearts more bold, their minds more full of joy,
Their spirits wiser; they shall have more friends,
Dear ones and kinsmen, truer and more good,
More kind and faithful, who will add more glory
And happiness by favors, who will lay
Upon them kindnesses and benefits,
And clasp them fast in the embrace of love.

1. Translations are from Richard Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (1970).

2. Solution: plow.

Say who I am, useful to men. My name
Is famous, good to men, and also sacred.[3]

Riddle 3

A moth ate words; a marvelous event
I thought it when I heard about that wonder,
A worm had swallowed some man's lay, a thief
In darkness had consumed the mighty saying
With its foundation firm. The thief was not
One whit the wiser when he ate those words.[4]

3. Solution: the Bible.

4. Solution: bookworm.

Irish Literature

The changes European literature underwent during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were greatly indebted to Celtic influences. The legends about King Arthur and his knights, although they were assimilated to the feudal culture of the Anglo-Normans and transmitted by texts written in Latin, French, and English (see p. 13), were originally products of Celtic myth and legend. The folkloric otherworld elements and the major role played by women in those stories profoundly shaped and colored the literature we now think of as "romance." The French Tristran romances, the romances of Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes, and even the legends of the Holy Grail could not have been imagined without their Celtic components.

The Celts overran central Europe, Spain, and the British Isles during the first millennium B.C.E. On the Continent and in Great Britain, south of the wall built by the emperor Hadrian (see the map inside the front cover), they were absorbed into the Roman Empire. However, the Celtic vernacular continued to be spoken as the native language, and Ireland never became a Roman province. The Anglo-Saxon invasions in the fifth and early sixth centuries, and the Danish invasions after the eighth, displaced the Celts in England, but Celtic language and culture continued to flourish in Wales (Welsh), in Cornwall (Cornish), in Scotland (Scottish Gaelic), across the English Channel in Brittany (Breton), and, of course, in Ireland (Gaelic). While still part of the Roman Empire, Britain and, in consequence, Ireland had been converted to Christianity. As portrayed in the Arthurian legend, the Christian Britons fought against barbaric Germanic invaders. Irish and Welsh missionaries, along with Roman ones, brought about the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons.

The earliest Celtic literature, like that of the Anglo-Saxons, was transmitted orally and little was copied down before the twelfth century. Nevertheless, the surviving monuments indicate its richness and its significance for the development of French and English medieval literature.

What follows are two examples of Irish literature, an excerpt from the Old Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley) and some delightful monastic lyrics written between the sixth and the ninth centuries.