

Life and Land in Anglo-Saxon England

The Anglo-Saxons knew that life – and land – is precarious, which makes its gifts precious.

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Life on land: hunting with the falcon, from an Anglo-Saxon calendar, 11th century. British Library/Bridgeman Images.

'Understand that you will have to leave your temporary dwelling, your home and native land. It is not known where your lord will send you then, when you can no longer enjoy life, a home in your own country, as you did before.'

This is a quotation from an anonymous Anglo-Saxon poem, preserved in an 11th-century manuscript, which gives advice to an unknown reader on living a good and moral life. The poem's outlook is expressly Christian, but here it uses a metaphor taken from the secular world: it imagines death as like being evicted, forced to leave your 'temporary dwelling' and settle in a new home at the will of an inscrutable landlord. The reader is reminded that their life on earth is like a house that does not belong to them, which they will have to leave one day.

The word this poet uses for 'temporary' is *læne*, an evocative word frequently found in Old English literature. Though usually translated as 'transient' or 'fleeting', its literal meaning is more specific: it is related to modern English *loan*, so the real sense is that something *læne* has been 'lent', and can be taken back again.

Anglo-Saxon writers thought of many possessions, tangible and intangible, as being 'lent' in this way. They use *læne* to describe the body, given to us only for a short span of time, or speak of 'þis læne lif', 'this loaned life'. The poem *The Wanderer* is famously comprehensive and blunt: 'Here money is *læne*, here friends are *læne*, here mankind is *læne*, here kinsmen are *læne*; all the foundations of this world come to nothing.'

To understand that everything on earth is *læne* is, for such writers, the beginning of wisdom. As in the opening quotation, the emphasis is on perceiving the real fragility of what appears to be a stable situation; the world's foundations may look firmly established, but they can give way beneath your feet. Naturally, this realisation may be especially potent at the moment of death, when the loan of life is recalled. In *Beowulf*, as the hero dies fighting a dragon, the poet imagines this valiant death as forced eviction from a leased home: Beowulf had to 'leave the earth; against his will he must find a dwelling in some other place, just as everyone must relinquish the days loaned to him'.

This poignant word seems to have derived at least some of its cultural power from a connection to economic transactions, housing and a detail of Anglo-Saxon property law. This was the distinction between *lænland*, lands leased by a lord to his men and held only for a defined period, and *bocland* ('bookland'), which was granted to the beneficiary in perpetuity and secured by written charter. A passage attributed to Alfred the Great describes a tenant caring for his temporary dwelling in the hope of being granted bookland:

Any person, if he has built a home by lease of his lord, with his support, likes to spend time there and go hunting, hawking and fishing and cultivate his leased property in every way ... until such time as he may earn bookland and a permanent heritage through his lord's generosity. May the rich benefactor so grant it, who has under his control both temporary habitations and eternal homes.

This is a metaphor for working towards a permanent home in heaven, where 'the rich benefactor' is God, but, as the medievalist Christine Fell writes, Alfred's contrast between temporary and permanent dwellings relies on the legal distinctions of land tenure: 'Earth is *lænland*, heaven is *bocland*, the country guaranteed by no less a charter than the gospels.' Alfred hopes his labours will help him to 'dwell more comfortably both in this temporary home beside the road while I am in this world, and also in that eternal home'.

This distinction, founded in a technical point of property law, offered metaphorical language for expressing fears about the uncertainties of life. Read today, the anxieties associated with the word *læne* resonate strangely with modern concerns about housing instability. Our public conversation about insecure housing increasingly recognises it as a pressing issue with profound social implications, affecting everything from the birthrate to the mental and physical health of 'Generation Rent'. The destabilising insecurity of knowing your home is *læne*, and can be taken away from you, appears at first to belong to a distant world, but the fears it expresses are closer than we might think.

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