

Oldest English poem discovered

Rome: The researchers in Ireland looked at their computer screen, marvelling at a medieval book tracked down in a Roman library. They flipped through its digitised pages and found their sought-after treasure: the oldest surviving English poem.

"We were extremely surprised. We were speechless. We couldn't believe our eyes when we first saw that," Elisabetta Magnanti, a visiting research fellow at Trinity College Dublin's school of English, told The Associated Press.

What's more, she said, the poem was within the main body of Latin text: "It was extraordinary."

Composed in Old English by a Northumbrian agricultural worker in the 7th century, *Caedmon's Hymn* appears within some copies of the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in Latin by a monk and saint known as the Venerable Bede. His history is one of the most widely reproduced texts from the Middle Ages, with almost 200 manuscripts, according to Magnanti's colleague Mark Faulkner, an associate professor of medieval



Caedmon's Hymn is in the five lines above the final line of the left page of this copy of the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* at Rome's National Library. (AP)

literature at Trinity.

He considers Caedmon's poem to be the start of English literature.

The manuscript he and Magnanti found is one of the oldest, dating from the 9th century. Two earlier copies contain the poem in Old English, but as afterthoughts — translated from Latin and scrawled into the margin or appended but not within the text's main body, according to the researchers.

The discovery sheds light on the English language's wide diffusion, long before

what was previously understood, Faulkner said in Rome, where the duo had travelled to view the text in person for the first time.

"Prior to the discovery of the Rome manuscript, the earliest one was from the early 12th century. So this is three centuries earlier than that. And so it attests to the importance that was already being attached to the English in the early 9th century," Faulkner said.

And it's something of a miracle they uncovered it at all.

Caedmon is said to have composed the poem while working at Whitby Abbey in North Yorkshire, after guests at a feast began reciting poems, Faulkner said.

"Embarrassed that he didn't know anything suitable, Caedmon left the feast and went to bed," he said. "A figure then appeared to him in his dreams telling him to sing about creation, which Caedmon miraculously did, producing the nine-line hymn."

Some 1,400 years later, this copy of his poem resurfaced in Rome's main public library — but not before crossing the Atlantic Ocean at least twice and changing hands even more times.

"I knew that the book was listed in the library's catalog, so I was almost certain that the book was, in fact, still here," Magnanti said. "I realised that, because of the very complex history of this book, no big scholar had really looked at it. So it had been virtually unstudied."

She emailed the library, which confirmed the book was in its stacks. Three months later, she received digital images of the entire manuscript.

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