

Task 4: POEMS FROM KENNINGS

Some Old English kennings were probably understood as easily as skyscraper is by us (*hilde-leoma* occurs frequently in the poems, for instance), but others may have been almost as strange to the original audience as they are to us. However transparent these mini-riddles may have been originally, the simple compound words suggest all sorts of associations that are not openly expressed, but implied by the metaphor.

As an example, to say that an arrow is a 'battle-snake' is to conjure up the hissing sound of hundreds of these terrible serpents being loosed through the air all at once. It suggests the stinging bite of the weapon as it makes its deadly strike, as well as the way many of its victims must have died not immediately, but slowly of the after-effects of the attack, perhaps even as a broken shard of the arrow's tongue embedded itself ever deeper, like a serpent's venom. As volley after volley of these *hilde-nædre* fell

on the battlefield, the litter of their shafts must have resembled the criss-crossing bodies of snakes one tried desperately not to step on.

Now take one of your favourite kennings so far – it could be an 'original' Old English kenning, or a new one invented by you or your classmates. Brainstorm all the different associations that are implied by this kenning, just as we did above for 'battle-snake'. You don't have to write in full sentences; feel free to make bullet points or 'mind maps' if that's an easier way to get your ideas out.

Try to write a poem about the subject of your chosen kenning, using as many of the words, images and ideas from your brain-storming as you can. You don't have to use the actual kenning if you don't want to, although you could use it, or its 'solution' as the title of your poem if you want. This is our attempt as an example. Tell us yours!

Hissing swarms glide through the air
as if the air were grass –
too fast for eyes (soon blind) to catch.
Companions drop,
stung by the sudden nip
of forked iron tongues.
A seething mass of criss-
crossing bodies rattle across the ground,
each venom-bearer first searching
for the weak spot,
striking at the loose chinks –
a wrist, the neck,
an ill-judged glimpse above the lowered shield –
hunting always for the Achilles heel.

