**Egill Skallagrimsson’s ‘Head Ransom’ Poem**

Egill Skallagrimsson was a great poet from Iceland who lived during the 8th Century. He was a warrior as well as a poet and often got into trouble.

According to one story, Egill was shipwrecked off the coast of Northumbria in England and captured by his enemy, King Erik Bloodaxe. To save his life, he quickly composed this poem, praising King Erik.

**And now I feed**

**With an English king:**

**So to English mead**

**I'll word-mead bring,**

**Your praise my task,**

**My song your fame,**

**If you but ask**

**I'll sound your name.**

**The scream of swords,**

**The clash of shields,**

**These are true words**

**On battlefields:**

**Man sees his death**

**Frozen in dreams,**

**But Erik’s breath**

**frees battle-streams.**

**As edges swing**

**Blades cut men down.**

**Erik the King**

**Earns his renown.**

**The peace is torn**

**By flying spears,**

**When bows are drawn**

**Wolves prick their ears,**

**The yew-bow shrills,**

**The edges bite,**

**The warrior wills**

**His men to fight.**

**The war-lord weaves**

**His web of fear,**

**Each man receives**

**His fated share:**

**A blood-red sun’s**

**The warrior’s shield,**

**The eagle scans**

**The battlefield.**

**The ravens dined**

**At this red fare,**

**Blood on the wind,**

**Death in the air;**

**The Scotsmen’s foes**

**Fed wolves their meat,**

**Death ends their woes**

**As eagles eat.**

**I praise the King**

**Throughout his land,**

**And keenly sing**

**His open hand,**

**His hand so free**

**With golden spoil:**

**But vice-like, he**

**Grips his own soil.**

**Bracelets of gold**

**He breaks in two**

**And, uncontrolled,**

**Pours gifts on you:**

**The lavish King**

**Loads you with treasure,**

**And everything**

**Is for your pleasure.**

**To praise my lord**

**This tight mouth broke,**

**The word-floods poured,**

**The still tongue spoke,**

**From my poet's breast**

**These words took wing:**

**Now all the rest**

**May learn to sing.**

**Comprehension questions:**

* Pick out words in the poem that bring sounds to life.
* What is mead and what do you think is meant by ‘word-mead’?
* Which animals appear and why might Egil have chosen them?
* What are the different weapons in his poem?
* What words does he use to describe the weapons?
* Besides praising his skill as a warrior how else does Egil flatter Erik?
* Do you think that Egil meant it when he praised Erik?