

Old English Literature: An Overview

(Simplified from Andrew Sanders)

1. The two terms: 'Old English' and 'Anglo-Saxon'

Before we look at the literature, we need to understand a small but important debate about naming. *Old English* is actually a fairly modern label. It was created in the 1800s by scholars (mostly German, and later British) who studied how the English language changed over time. They divided English into three stages: *Old English*, *Middle English*, and *Modern English*. Calling this early period *Old English* suggested something important: that there was a continuous, unbroken line connecting the England of the 6th century to the England of the 19th century. *Anglo-Saxon* is the older, more traditional name, but it carries a different feeling. It suggests a culture that feels separate from modern England, almost foreign. Henry Sweet, an important Oxford phonetician (someone who studies speech sounds), made a deliberate choice in 1871. In his edition of one of King Alfred's translations, he announced he would use the term *Old English* instead of *Anglo-Saxon*, which he called a "barbarous and unmeaning title." King Alfred himself, writing over a thousand years before Sweet, never called his own language Anglo-Saxon. He called it *englisc*. This was the language of his own kingdom, Wessex, and of the wider group of English-speaking peoples he ruled.

2. The Anglo-Saxon Settlement of Britain

Three closely related Germanic peoples: the *Angles*, the *Saxons*, and the *Jutes* invaded Britain in the 5th and 6th centuries. At the time, Britain was a former Roman colony.

These invaders brought three things with them:

1. Their own *Germanic language*
2. Their *paganism* (their old religion, before Christianity)
3. Their *warrior traditions*

The native inhabitants were Celtic peoples who had already converted to Christianity under Roman rule. The invading Angles, Saxons, and Jutes pushed these Celts westward (into Wales and Cornwall) and northward (into the Scottish Highlands).

The success of this invasion is clearly visible in England's place names, most of which are unmistakably English (Germanic), showing ownership of farms and settled land. There are two main exceptions:

1. Celtic names survived for rivers, hills, and forests.
2. Old Roman towns kept traces of Latin, visible in place names ending in -chester and -cester (like Manchester, Worcester).

Stories survived of a Celtic prince who resisted the Saxon invasion in the 6th century, claiming imperial authority. These stories were later woven into the largely legendary tales of *King Arthur*, but the historical resistance itself is real, even if the Arthur legends built on top of it are mostly myth.

3. The Arrival of Christianity

Britain's Anglo-Saxon population was *re-Christianized* (converted to Christianity again, since the Celts had already been Christian) starting in the late 6th century.

This happened along two separate routes. In the north and in *Scotland*, Celtic monks carried out missionary work. In the south, *Pope Gregory the Great* sent a group of Benedictine monks from *Rome* in AD 596. This mission was led by *Augustine*, who became the first *Archbishop of Canterbury*. The organized structure of the Benedictine monks, and the network of monasteries they built across England, connected Britain to two things at once:

1. The wider Latin civilization of the Roman Church
2. The newly growing Christian cultures of the rest of Western Europe

By the end of the *7th century*, every Anglo-Saxon kingdom in *England* had accepted Roman Christianity. Remarkably, just a century after Augustine's arrival, the English Church was confident enough to send its own missionaries to convert pagan peoples on the European continent. The two most successful were:

1. *Willibrord* (658–739): a Northumbrian priest who founded the Dutch bishopric ("see") of *Utrecht* and the great abbey at *Echternach*.
2. *Boniface* (680–754): known as the *Apostle of Germany*. He famously cut down an oak tree sacred to the pagan god Thor at *Geismar*, was made the first *Archbishop of Mainz* in 747, and later died as a martyr in *Frisia* after returning to missionary work.

4. Bede

Bede (673–735) is known as the first great English historian. He tells us that Augustine's mission was reinforced four years after arriving by new clergy from Rome, who brought "everything necessary for the worship and service of the Church", including, importantly, many books.

Bede wrote his great work, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (The Ecclesiastical History of the English People), in Latin, for an international audience, completing it in AD 731. More than 150 medieval manuscripts of this History survive today, and it remains an essential record of how Christianity spread through England.

5. The English (Vernacular) Literary Tradition

Even though literacy was mostly limited to people in religious orders (monks, priests), a broader oral literary tradition in English continued to exist and flourish among ordinary people.

Certain parts of religious instruction, especially *sermons* and *homilies* (religious teaching talks), naturally used English rather than Latin, since they needed to reach ordinary people. The most important surviving sermons date from late in the Anglo-Saxon period.

Winchester and educational reform: The great monastery of *Winchester*, in the royal capital of *Wessex*, is credited with a series of educational reforms in the late *10th century*. These reforms likely influenced the clear, alliterative English prose written by two major clerics:

1. *Wulfstan* (d. 1023): *Bishop of Worcester* and *Archbishop of York*, author of the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* ("Wolf's Sermon to the English")
2. *Ælfric* (c. 955 – c. 1010): a monk at *Winchester*, later *Abbot of Eynsham*, who wrote two series called *Catholic Homilies* and *Lives of the Saints*. His writing shows familiarity with the traditional style of Old English poetry.

Translating the Bible into English: The Bible was widely available only in a Latin translation from the 4th century, known as the *Vulgate* (translated by St. Jerome). People tried hard to translate it into English for those who didn't know Latin well:

1. Bede himself was working on an English translation of the *Gospel of St. John* at the time of his death.
2. The *Lindisfarne Gospels*, a beautifully illustrated 7th-century manuscript, had an English translation ("gloss") added to it in Northumbrian English in the 10th century.
3. A West Saxon version of the four *Gospels* survives in six manuscripts. Its formal, poetic, liturgical rhythm influenced every later English Bible translation, right up until the plainer, more functional English translations of the mid-20th century.

6. Viking Raids and the Cultural Revival

The Viking attacks: In 793, 62 years after Bede had finished his *History* on a hopeful, peaceful note, the nearby abbey of *Lindisfarne* was violently sacked by *Viking* raiders. *Jarrow* suffered a similar fate the following year. For roughly a century, the ordered monastic culture of England was severely disrupted (in some places, completely destroyed), libraries were scattered or destroyed, and monastic schools were abandoned. Alfred the Great's revival: It was not until the reign of *King Alfred of Wessex* (848–899) that English learning was purposefully encouraged again.

The 10th-century monastic revival: A thorough revival of the monasteries took place in the 10th century, led by three key churchmen:

1. Dunstan, *Archbishop of Canterbury* (c. 910–988)
2. Æthelwold, *Bishop of Winchester* (?908–984)
3. Oswald, *Bishop of Worcester* (d. 992)

This is the crucial period that produced our surviving poetry. From this era date the four most important surviving manuscripts of Old English poetry: the *Junius manuscript*, the *Beowulf manuscript*, the *Vercelli Book*, and the *Exeter Book*.

They were almost certainly produced in monastic *scriptoria* (writing rooms), although the poems' anonymous authors were not necessarily monks themselves. Many of the individual poems are believed to date from a much earlier period: their presence in these 10th-century collections shows that an older poetic tradition survived, and that Anglo-Saxon poetry was wide-ranging, complex, and sophisticated.

7. The Oral Tradition, the Scop, and the Structure of Old English Verse

Cædmon, the first named English poet: According to Bede, the earliest dated Old English poem was written by *Cædmon*, an unskilled servant working at the monastery of *Whitby* in the late 7th century. According to the story, Cædmon had always been too afraid to take up the harp and sing at feasts. Then, in a dream, he was divinely granted the gift of poetry, and upon waking composed a short hymn praising God the Creator. His poetic talent was considered so remarkable that he was admitted into the monastic community, where he supposedly composed a series of poems (now lost) on scriptural subjects, including Christ's Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection.

The scop, the professional poet: Old English poetry's elaborate, formal language likely came from an older Germanic bardic tradition, which recognized the important role of a professional poet called a *scop*. A scop would perform verses, often improvised, celebrating heroic themes at gatherings in royal, noble, and even monastic halls. The scop drew on a word-hoard, a stock of elevated, formal poetic language and vocabulary.

The structure of Old English verse: This poetry has its roots in an oral tradition. Its defining formal feature is a complex pattern of *alliteration* (repeated consonant sounds). Here's how it works:

- Each full line of poetry is split into two half-lines.
- Each half-line carries two stressed syllables (and a varying number of unstressed syllables).
- The two half-lines are joined together by alliteration: specifically, the alliteration is carried on the first stressed syllable of the second half-line.

This structure gives Old English poetry its distinctive, rhythmic, chant-like quality, which is very different from the rhymed poetry that came later in English literary history.

8. Beowulf

Beowulf is the most substantial surviving Old English poem, and it can properly be called an *epic*: a poem celebrating a hero's achievements in narrative verse.

It was once believed that *Beowulf* was originally a pagan poem, later edited by Christian monks to add a Christian framework. This theory is no longer considered valid by most scholars, though the surviving 10th-century manuscript may postdate the poem's actual composition by 300–400 years. The anonymous poet clearly knows his story is set in a pagan past, with characters holding pagan values, but he also believes older heroic ideals can be compatible with his own Christian moral values.

How the poem blends pagan and Christian elements:

- The poem refers back to an age of Scandinavian monster slayings, but reinterprets them as struggles between good and evil, between humanity and destructive forces that undo human order.
- Grendel, the first monster, is called *Godes andsaca* (God's enemy, or adversary) and is said to descend from the biblical *Cain* (the first murderer, from Genesis).
- The poem suggests its original audience shared this mixed culture, comfortable with both an ancestral pagan world and a recognition that primitive heroism could still matter to a Christian society.

Structure of the poem: Although the plot may seem loosely episodic compared to *Homer* or *Virgil*, *Beowulf* is actually built around three central encounters with supernatural, monstrous forces. These monster-fights seem to violently interrupt scenes of human celebration and community. Around these three encounters, other stories are woven in, broadening the poem's scope to a larger civilization and tradition. The three monster fights are:

1. Grendel: a predator who stalks at night, living apart from both men and faith. Beowulf challenges and mortally wounds him, then drives him back to his lair.
2. Grendel's mother: she mounts a revenge attack on the hall (Heorot) after her son's death. Beowulf and his companions pursue her to her underwater lair and kill her there, in a passage full of images of uninhabitable wastelands and bleak sea-cliffs.
3. The dragon: Beowulf's final fight, much later in his life, as an old king.

The Sigemund comparison and foreshadowing: After Beowulf's victory over Grendel, *King Hrothgar's* scop compares him to *Sigemund*, a great dragon-slayer from

Germanic legend. To the poem's original audience, this comparison would suggest that Beowulf's heroic path would inevitably lead, like Sigemund's, to further monster encounters, and, ultimately, to his own death. This creates a grand, tragic irony fitting for epic poetry.

Beowulf's death: When Beowulf finally faces the dragon, he seems to be a more troubled man, haunted by an awareness of *wyrd* (fate/destiny). He who has lived his life by the sword (his defining inheritance) must now die by it. He is betrayed by warriors (*liegemen*) who are too afraid to help him fight. He dies leaving behind a kingdom vulnerable to neighboring princes eager to exploit the political vacuum left by his death.

9. The Battle of Maldon and the Elegies

The Battle of Maldon

This fragmentary poem (written around AD 1000) describes a real historical battle that took place in 991, between the *Essex* nobleman *Byrhtnoth* and a raiding party of *Vikings*. *Byrhtnoth* is portrayed as a brave, if reckless (rash), warrior, almost a martyr, sacrificing his life and his loyal followers' lives for his king (Ethelred) and his nation (*folc* and *foldan* — people and land). His martyrdom is ambiguous: his rashness in allowing the Vikings to cross a river that should have blocked them led directly to his defeat. The poet may present this as a noble Christian sacrifice against a pagan enemy, but there are also hints that loyalty and brotherhood among *Byrhtnoth*'s men matter especially because God might be indifferent to their fate.

Deor

A short poem, spoken in the first person, in which a scop named *Deor* laments having been replaced by a rival poet. *Deor* comforts himself by meditating on five examples of misfortune, all drawn from Germanic legend and history. After each example, he repeats a refrain reminding himself that since past sorrows eventually passed, his own pain may pass too. By the end, the poem moves from a general pagan endurance of fate toward a Christian assertion of faith in divine providence.

Widsith

Structured as a soliloquy spoken by an imaginary scop, a far-wanderer who unlocks his word-hoard to describe all the peoples and rulers he has visited. His catalogue of nations is mostly Germanic, but he also displays biblical knowledge by listing the *Jews*, *Egyptians*, *Assyrians*, *Medes*, and *Persians*. He emphasizes the rewards given to him by generous patrons, both recalling past generosity and reminding his current audience of their own obligations to reward poets.

The Wanderer

Unlike the prosperous scop of Widsith, the narrator of *The Wanderer* (who may not necessarily be a professional poet) has lost his lord and patron. He describes a bitterly alienating vision of frozen waves, sea-birds, and winter cold, a wasteland of exile, built through precise metaphors and carefully chosen adjectives. The sea, which was so important to the ancestral history of an island people, becomes instead a symbol of disconnection: its emptiness and violent winters representing the failure of human relationships, loneliness, and exile. Like other Old English narrators, the Wanderer eventually finds comfort in wisdom shaped by patient acceptance of divine fate.

The Seafarer

This poem contrasts the comforts of settled life on land with the hardships of life at sea, but in a more poignant and ambiguous way than *The Wanderer*. The narrator describes enduring *bitre breostceare* (bitter breast-sorrow) and hearing nothing but the pounding sea and the ice-cold wave, yet his dangerous experiences at sea also seem to genuinely thrill him. Unlike the Wanderer, his exile is self-imposed, not forced by rejection or loss of patronage. Though he values the security of life on shore, he also distrusts it: the cuckoo (a symbol of summer on land) merely reminds him that time is passing, while the cry of a sea-bird tempts him back to the sea's exhilaration. By the poem's end, the narrator sets up a final contrast: the shore represents the transient, uncertain nature of the earthly world, while heaven represents the only truly secure home for a wandering (peregrinatory) soul.

The Ruin

A short, fragmentary poem describing the crumbling stones of a ruined city, probably the wrecked Roman city of *Aquae Sulis* (modern-day Bath). The narrator wonders at the fact that such mighty builders could have ever existed (since most Anglo-Saxon buildings were made of wood, not stone, and early English settlers seem to have avoided old Roman sites, perhaps for superstitious reasons). Rather than expressing pure alienation, the narrator instead expresses an exile from vanished wonders, a feeling reinforced by the passage of time and *wyrd*.

The Wife's Lament

This poem, along with *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *Deor*, *Widsith*, and *The Ruin*, survives in the *Exeter Book*. It offers a distinct variation on the common elegiac themes of banishment, displacement, and social disgrace: it presents a rare woman's voice, mourning the absence of her banished husband, though the exact situation is left unclear and many details are cryptic (hard to interpret). It has sometimes been linked to a related poem called *The Husband's Message*. It may also connect to the

short poetic Riddles (also preserved in the Exeter Book), dense little poems that show Anglo-Saxon audiences' fascination with metaphor. Because the Exeter anthology has clear religious (ecclesiastical) connections, The Wife's Lament has sometimes been interpreted as a paraphrase of the biblical Song of Songs, traditionally read by the Christian Church as an allegory for the soul's longing for its heavenly lover.

10. The Biblical Poems

A large body of Old English religious poetry is based directly on Scripture and Latin saints' lives. Bede tells us Cædmon supposedly wrote verses on *Genesis*, *Exodus*, and the *Gospels*, but none of the surviving poems on these subjects can be safely credited to a named poet. *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Daniel*, and *Judith*: These poems are much more than simple paraphrases of the Bible.

Genesis opens with a grand justification for praising God, then moves to a lengthy, non-biblical account of the fall of the rebel angels, framed as a vast struggle between good and evil. A section known as *Genesis B* treats Adam's fall as a betrayal of trust toward his "liege-lord" (God), punished by exile from divine protection, using the same lord/vassal loyalty language found in the heroic poems.

Exodus uses military metaphors throughout, treating the conflict between the *Israelites* and *Egyptians* as an armed struggle in which the Israelites triumph. *Daniel* (its apparent poetic sequel) emphasizes divine intervention in human affairs, possibly reflecting the use of *Old Testament* deliverance stories in *Holy Week* and *Easter* church ceremonies.

Christ and Satan portrays Christ as a warrior battling the forces of darkness, covering the fall of the angels, the Harrowing of Hell, and Christ's Resurrection and Ascension, climaxing with an account of the temptation in the wilderness.

Judith (a fragmentary poem surviving in the Beowulf manuscript) has a valiant female warrior as its protagonist. Judith struggles against a monster of depravity, the invader *Holofernes*, in a way that closely parallels Beowulf's struggle against Grendel.

Cynewulf and the apostle poems: Poems based on apocryphal (non-biblical, legendary) saints' lives show how the language and style of secular heroic verse could be adapted for Christian epic.

Andreas: a militant St. Andrew crosses the sea to rescue fellow apostle St. Matthew from imprisonment and from being eaten by cannibals (the anthropophagi of Mermedonia).

The Fates of the Apostles: signed in runic fashion by a poet named Cynewulf, recounting the missionary journeys and martyrdoms of the twelve apostles, portrayed as tough Nordic heroes.

Elene: also by Cynewulf, telling the story of St. Helena's discovery of the True Cross.

Juliana: also by Cynewulf, the story of a Roman virgin martyr.

11. The Dream of the Rood

This is widely considered the most profound, moving, and intellectually sophisticated of the specifically Christian Old English poems. *Rood* is an old word for the *Cross* (specifically, Christ's cross).

The poem describes a dream-vision of Christ's cross. Its structure has a fluid, daring quality, at times almost surreal, built around paradox and a fascination with transformation (metamorphosis). It opens with the dreamer's vision of a gilded, bejeweled cross of victory (sige beam), worshipped by angels. Despite its glorious, supernatural brightness, the vision fills the dreamer with a deep sense of unworthiness and sin, he begins to realize the cross's appearance is paradoxical: it is both glorious and moist with blood, having once bled on its right side.

The cross itself then begins to speak, describing how a tree was cut down and shaped into a gallows, which a young hero (Christ) willingly embraced. Both the cross and the hero (Christ) were pierced by the same nails, and both were mocked and bloodied. Having shared in Christ's Passion, the cross is discarded and buried, then later discovered by the Lord's thanes, who recognize it as the instrument of salvation.

The Rood is miraculously transformed by Christ's Resurrection and Ascension, and is now glorified in Heaven as "the best of signs" ("beacna selest"). When the cross finishes speaking and the dreamer resumes, his words are filled with joy, worship, and wonder.

Like the narrators of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, the dreamer is torn between contemplating heavenly serenity and his attachment to the uncertainties of earthly life. He longs for heaven, which he pictures as a glorified royal mead-hall, a fitting image, since it represents both lordly generosity and the eternal communion of saints.

The Dream of the Rood plays with the great paradoxes of Christianity, but its treatment feels more profound and concrete than the more puzzle-like, riddle-style religious poetry of the period. It presents readers with an icon: a paradoxical sign that requires interpretation, and which is finally merged completely with the meaning it represents.