

## Literature and Society before 1066

### *Caedmon's Hymn*

Strictly speaking, there is no starting-point for poetry in English society because oral poetry was being composed long before recorded history starts. One symbolic new beginning, that of Christian poetry, is represented by Bede's story about Caedmon's dream and his *Hymn*:

In the monastery at Whitby lived a brother singularly gifted by God's grace. So skilful was he in composing religious and devotional songs that, when any passage of the Bible was explained to him by interpreters, he could quickly turn it into delightful and moving poetry in his own English tongue. These verses of his have stirred the hearts of many to despise the world and aspire to heavenly things. Others after him have tried to compose religious poems in English, but none could compare with him; for he did not acquire the art of poetry from men or through any human teacher, but received it as a free gift from God. For this reason he could never compose any frivolous or profane verses; only such as had a religious theme fell from his lips.

He had followed a secular occupation until well advanced in years, without learning anything about poetry. Indeed it sometimes happened at a feast that all the guests in turn would be invited to sing and entertain the company; then, when he saw the harp coming his way, he would get up from the table and go home.

On one such occasion he left the house in which the entertainment was being held and went out to the stable, where it was his duty that night to look after the beasts. There, when the time came, he settled down to sleep. Suddenly in a dream he saw a man standing beside him who called him by name. "Caedmon," he said, "sing me a song." "I don't know how to sing," he replied, "It is because I cannot sing that I left the feast and came here." The man who addressed him then said: "But you shall sing to me." "What should I sing about?" "Sing about the Creation of all things," the other answered. And Caedmon immediately began to sing verses in praise of God the Creator that he had never heard before:

Nu sculon herigean heofonrices Weard  
 Meotodes meahte and his modgethanc  
 weorc Wuldor-Faeder swa he wundra gehwaes  
 ece Drihten or onstealde.  
 He aere sceop ielda bearnum  
 heofon to hrofe halig Scyppend  
 tha middangeard moncynnes Weard  
 ece Drihten aefter teode  
 firum foldan Frea aelmihtig

Now must we praise heaven-kingdom's Guard,  
 the Measurer's might and his mind-thoughts,  
 the work of the Glory-Father when he of wonders each,  
 eternal Lord, the origin established.  
 He first created for men's children  
 heaven as a roof, the holy Creator;  
 then middle-earth, mankind's Guard,  
 the eternal Lord, after made  
 for men the earth, the Master almighty.

When the scholar-monk Bede (c.673 - 735) recorded this story in the great *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* that he completed in 731, he was writing in Latin, and he gave the words of Caedmon's hymn in Latin. A few years later, some copies of the History were

made with the text of the hymn in its original language. Today that language is called Old English; it was part of the West Germanic family of languages that developed into modern German, and Dutch, as well as English.

With the conversion of the various English kingdoms to Christianity from 597 onwards, the Church in Western Europe had for the first time to find ways of communicating the Christian faith to people whose language was not based on Latin. The Old English language was very close to that being used in what is now North Germany; it had a rich poetic tradition of its own, one that had no written form, expressing attitudes to life that were naturally not Christian. In this story Bede suggests that God directly inspired Caedmon (and others after him) to "convert" the traditional poetry of his people into Christian poetry, in a new cultural synthesis.

## Christianity enters England

At the time of Bede, the Latin-speaking form of Catholic Christianity found in France and Italy had been present in England for only about 100 years. In 597 a missionary called Augustine (later known as Augustine of Canterbury) was sent from Rome by the Pope Gregory the Great to evangelize the pagans of the island that the Romans had called Britannia but which was now becoming known as England, from the name of the people called Angles.

The Angles are supposed to have sailed across from North Germany; Bede says they first arrived in 449 and settled in the Eastern parts, especially the area today known as East Anglia. Bede tells of Pope Gregory joking that they should not be called Angles but Angels. In the regions south of London, other groups known as Saxons had settled; their name means "users of short swords".

With the departure of the Roman army from Britain in 404, and the fall of Rome in 410, the urban centres and rural farms that the Romans had introduced quickly and inexplicably collapsed. Splendid towns and great farming villas were left empty; forgetting Latin, the Celtic-speaking British inhabitants soon moved away westwards. Many of these Celtic British were Christians, so that when the Angles and Saxons arrived, they were isolated from them by their different language and culture. The South Saxons gave their name to Sussex, but more powerful were the West Saxons, whose kingdom of Wessex, centered in Winchester, soon covered most of South-West England.

Augustine began his mission in Kent, for much of central England was under a king, Ethelbert, who had his capital city in what is now called Canterbury (*Kent-burgh*: City of the Kentish folk). Ethelbert was married to a Christian princess from France, and this meant that he was already open to the new religion, which had continued without interruption to be the official religion of France and Italy. London, which had been founded by the Romans, was at this time not a major centre of English life. Canterbury has retained the status of most important archdiocese of the Church in England until today.

Then in 635 Aidan, a Celtic monk from the Scottish island monastery of Iona, arrived in the far north-east of England, in the kingdom called Northumbria, and began a monastery on the coast at Lindisfarne as a new mission centre. In 657 Aidan's famous pupil, Hilda, began a new monastery for men and women at Whitby, and it was there, while Hilda was still alive, that Caedmon began to sing his English poems. The Celtic Church had no contacts with the West European Church centred in Rome, it had originally been influenced by the Greek and Middle-eastern Christian tradition. It had a richly poetic spirituality of its own, which influenced Bede as well as Caedmon. In 664 the two churches, Celtic and Roman, were united at the Synod of Whitby.

Soon after that, in 674, a man called Benedict Biscop returned to his native Northumbria after several visits to Rome and France, where he had become a monk, and founded a monastery

at Wearmouth. During his visits to Italy he collected manuscripts and met many artists working in religious art. In his new monastery at Wearmouth, and in another which he helped found nearby at Jarrow, the church was built of stone and was decorated with glass windows and paintings. The art of singing the services was taught by a famous church-musician brought from Rome. Most important, Benedict Biscop's library contained both Christian books of theology and a number of works of classical Latin literature.

## Bede (c.673 - 735)

Bede knew Benedict Biscop, entering the Wearmouth monastery of St Peter, where he was Abbot, when he was seven. Later Bede went to live for the rest of his life at the monastery of St Paul in Jarrow. Thanks to the books in the libraries, Bede was able to study deeply, then write more than forty books, mostly commentaries on parts of the Bible. Bede's works were read for centuries everywhere in Europe and it is because Bede adopted the method of dating calculated by an Egyptian monk counting the years from the (wrongly estimated) birth of Jesus, that it was generally accepted and is still used everywhere today (*Anno Domini* 1996).

His most famous work is the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, and it is still popular reading (in translation) today. It must be considered the first truly great work written in England, for it is one of the greatest historical works ever written; of course, until the time of Shakespeare most European literature was written in Latin. It is remarkable for the vivid style of its narrative. This may be because Bede had gathered much of his material from interviews with survivors of the events he is reporting and from documents of the time. Thanks to him, we can sense the spirit of the age in a special way.

Bede tells how, around 627, King Edwin of Northumbria was wondering whether to become a Christian like his wife. A missionary had come from Kent with the Queen, but the king was obliged to ask the advice of his thanes. Coifi, a head priest of the old pagan religion, speaks: "I frankly admit that in my experience the religion that we have hitherto professed seems valueless and powerless. Therefore, if on examination you perceive that these new teachings are better and more effectual, let us not hesitate to accept them."

Then in one of his most famous passages, Bede tells us the words of another, unknown, lord:

When we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day... In the middle there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. In the same way, man appears on the earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it.

The missionary speaks all night then, as day is breaking, Coifi rides out to the pagan temples he had served and burns them; the king is baptized in York.

There are important points to be made from these stories. First, writing was not known in England until the Church introduced it, it was at first limited to the writing of Latin. Native English was rarely written at first. Caedmon could neither read nor write, and he composed his songs in his head overnight, preparing them for public recitation the next day. This society was still in the stage of oral culture, when there was no alternative to the use of human memory. Oral poetry is always a specially mannered form of discourse, using rhythm, and often (as in Caedmon's Hymn) patterns of alliteration, (or of assonance), to give more easily remembered

lines. There can be no fixed text, because each performance will be a re-creation.

## The Germanic Inheritance

The society of 6th century England stood at a great dividing-line. The Germanic peoples had brought with them from their long centuries of semi-nomadic life a culture, a religion, and stories both mythical and heroic, that were part of the basic Indo-European tradition. Their society was fragmentary, consisting of small family-groups united by common forms of dialect. There was no wider established social structure and in daily life everything depended on one's local lord, or king. During the ages of migration (in German *Volkswanderung*), the lord was the leader of the group, a man who had what was needed in terms of authority and physical strength. The word Lord was originally *hlaf-weard* or "loaf-guard" while the word Lady was *hlaf-dig* or "loaf-knead". The provision of food was a vital and a difficult task for the little group of families forming each social nucleus; each village was tempted to try to steal from others anything that it needed, whether food, weapons, or gold. Warfare was usually a matter of raids by a handful of men. The largest settlements were still only farms and in each place where there was a lord, life centred on his hall.

In Germanic society, very similar to that portrayed in Homer's *Odyssey*, the heroic virtues of courage and generosity were most admired. When they were found in a man (women had little hope of being remembered), songs would be made when that man did some great deed, and when he died. Similarly, if there was some very terrible event it would be remembered in song. These songs were later sung in the hall, for pleasure, or before battle to give courage.

The hall (the word means a covered space) was the centre and the image of society; it was a place of comfort, security, and sharing. Those who depended on a lord were his thanes. They were fighters and remained free within a form of contractual relationship known as *comitatus*. They received from him their food each day in the hall, where they also often slept. The hall was at times the scene of prolonged drinking, of ale or mead (a drink made from honey). The lord also distributed gifts to his thanes, especially weapons or gold.

The Christian religion brought to England from France and Rome was only one aspect of a totally different world. The tribes of Germany had never been under Roman rule. When the Franks and Burgunds crossed the Rhine into Gaul at the end of the Roman Empire, they found a stable form of Christian society. They were quickly integrated into it, adopted its laws and customs, and became Romans by culture and language.

In England this was not possible because Roman society had collapsed, but the desire was there to become Roman nonetheless. This helps explain why, if a local king in England was converted, all the people living under him followed his example. And at once the English Christians imported as much of the culture of Rome as they could. They were consciously turning their backs on their Germanic past. That helps explain why, in the earliest stages of the Christian mission, the Church helped kings to establish written laws, and encouraged a return to the larger cities such as London or York, that had been Roman centres of government. Soon, the influence of Bede encouraged the idea that all the English were destined to form a single kingdom under a king who would enjoy God's special help.

The British did not give up their language in favor of Latin as the Franks in Gaul did. Their Germanic language (and in the western areas the Celtic) continued as daily speech, while the Church worshipped and studied in Latin. The Christian Church introduced the seven day week, and gave names to the days of the week. Several of the names in Latin (and modern French) contain the names of old Roman gods: after Sun-day and Moon-day came Mars-day, Mercury-day, Jove-day, Venus-day, and Saturn-day; the Latin names were translated using the names of old Germanic gods, Tiu, Woden, Thor, and Frigg (Frigg was the wife of Woden),

whose myths were vaguely similar to the corresponding Roman gods.

There was bound to be a tension between this new Christian cultural identity, imported from the Mediterranean world, and the ethos expressed in the old Germanic songs and stories of the people's oral tradition. Even though most of the myths about the pagan gods seem not to have survived the crossing of the North Sea, there must have been other forms of popular song. It is easier to baptize everyone than to stop them singing. That explains the importance Bede gives to the miracle of Caedmon's song. One means of bringing the ordinary people into touch with the Bible and Christianity will be by turning the main Bible stories into popular poetry to be sung to the illiterate population.

Bede himself also wrote hymns in English, and it is probably at this time that unknown writers adapted traditional forms of poetic story-telling about heroes when they wrote the narrative poems called *Genesis, Daniel, Christ and Satan*. These works suggest, rather than relate, the Bible stories; they are marked by the heroic ethos that had previously celebrated the great warriors of the past.

### *The Dream of the Rood*

Another poem, more lyrical in tone, was also perhaps written in Bede's lifetime: *The Dream of the Rood* (the "Rood" is an old word for "Cross"). This poem was later copied into a manuscript that has for centuries been in Vercelli (Italy), but some lines from it are carved on a stone cross that was erected in Ruthwell (Scotland) around the year 700. It is noted for its intensity, which seems to owe something to the traditional form of riddle that seems to have been appreciated very much:

Hwaet! Ic swefna cyst    secgan wylle,  
hwaet me gemaette    to midre nihte,  
syththan reordberend    reste wunedon.

Hwaet!  
A dream came to me at deep midnight  
When humankind kept their beds  
- the dream of dreams! I shall declare it.

It seemed I saw the Tree itself  
Borne on the air, light wound about it,  
- a beam of brightest wood, a beacon clad  
In overlapping gold, glancing gems  
Fair at its foot, and five stones  
Set in a crux flashed from the crosstree...

Then I saw, marching toward me,  
Mankind's brave King;  
He came to climb upon me.

I dared not break or bend aside  
Against God's will, though the ground itself  
Shook at my feet. Fast I stood,  
Who falling could have felled them all...

But there quickly came from far  
Earls to the One there...

Set to contrive Him a tomb  
in the sight of the Tree of Death,

Carved it of bright stone,  
laid in it the Bringer of victory...

The main characteristics of the style of this poem, here translated into modern English by Michael Alexander, are its wealth of evocative imagery and the slow unrolling of its theme. By its appositive style, things are suggested rather than stated clearly and logically. There is a feeling of intense melancholy, sustained by the theme of weird or fate, that ultimate destiny which cannot be avoided. The riddle-like kennings such as "soul-house" for "body" add to the richness of effect.

In its theme, the most striking point is the way in which Jesus, never named, is turned into a dead battle-hero; the vocabulary is royal and heroic. The disciples have become his thanes. The final part of this poem, not quoted here, is more prosaic. After the intense and tremendously imaginative pathos of the dream-vision the speaker of the poem becomes a preacher, drawing out a moralizing Christian conclusion.

### *Two Riddles*

Of the 30,000 lines of Old English poetry which have survived, the vast majority of poems are Christian in subject matter: either versions of Bible stories, saints' lives, or wisdom-poems about morality and life. Even the 95 riddles in the Exeter Manuscript are in part influenced by Latin riddles and seem to be designed as a means of instruction:

I'm the world's wonder, for I make women happy  
- A boon to the neighbourhood, a bane to no one,  
Though I may perhaps prick the one who picks me.  
I am set well up, stand in a bed,  
have a roughish root. Rarely (though it happens)  
a churl's daughter more daring than the rest  
- and lovelier!-lays hold of me,  
rushes my red top, wrenches at my head,  
and lays me in the larder.

She learns soon enough,  
the curly-haired creature who clamps me so,  
of my meeting with her: moist is her eye!

(The answer may, or may not, be "an onion")

I heard of a wonder, of words moth-eaten;  
that is a strange thing, I thought, weird  
that a man's song be swallowed by a worm,  
his binded sentences, his bedside stand-by  
rustled in the night--and the robber-guest  
Not one whit the wiser for the words he had mumbled.

(The answer: a book-worm eating a manuscript)

(Translations by Michael Alexander)

### Relations with the European Continent

The first Angles are said by Bede to have arrived in 449, and from then on there was constant coming and going between England and the Germanic areas of northern Europe. Quite naturally, the first Christian missionaries to the German lands went out from England and

Ireland in the lifetime of Bede. Willibrord from Northumbria went to Frisia in 690, Boniface from Devon left for Germany in 718; many others followed them. There they helped the Frankish rulers Charles Martel and his son Pepin in their efforts to establish a Christian social culture. Boniface, in particular, established the West German Church, was active as first bishop of Mainz, and finally died a martyr in 755.

By that time, the future Charlemagne (742-814) (Carolus Magnus, Charles the Great) was growing up in the Frankish court, becoming king of the Franks in 768 before being crowned Holy Roman Emperor in Rome in 800. He too had close links with England, thanks to his choice of Alcuin as head of the Palace School in Aachen. Alcuin was educated in the Cathedral School in York, which had been begun by a pupil of Bede. Thanks to copies of books from Benedict Biscop's library and other sources, it had the best library in England. Alcuin became head of the York school, but after meeting Charles in Italy in 781 he left for Germany, and helped in the establishment of monasteries, schools, and libraries. Thanks to him, classical education in Latin, the seven liberal arts, became the basic programme of studies there.

This Carolingian Renaissance is characterized by a desire to introduce Christian and Roman culture in place of what was available in the oral traditions of the Franks; this meant in practice the use of Latin in all study and writing. This can be partly explained by the fact that Charlemagne was ruling over two kinds of peoples. To the West and South of Aachen, the Franks had adopted the spoken *lingua Romana* that was already no longer pure Latin, but on the way to becoming French. To the East, people were speaking the West Germanic dialects collectively called *Deutsch* (meaning popular, national). What we call Latin was characterized as *lingua grammatica* and it offered an ideal unifying language for the administration of an Empire that covered all of western Europe except for the Iberian Peninsula. After Charlemagne's death, the French-speaking regions broke away from the Empire, which after that was for a long time limited to the German-speaking lands.

## The *Genesis* Poems

There is one English poem of this period that shows signs of influence in the opposite direction, from Europe into England. In the Bodleian Library of Oxford University there is a manuscript copied around 1000 that in the 17th century belonged to the Dutch scholar Francis Junius, a close friend of John Milton. In 1654 Junius published the poems contained in his manuscript, the first modern edition of Old English poetry. In this Junius Manuscript there are the four long religious poems *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Daniel*, and *Christ and Satan*. These works follow the spirit of Bede's description of Caedmon's undertaking, making the great Christian stories available as vernacular verse.

In the 19th century it was noticed (by the scholar Sievers) that the poem called *Genesis* is a combination of at least two separate poems. It begins as a Caedmonian poem telling the story of the Creation, but suddenly we find the traditional story (not told in the Bible) of the Revolt of Satan and his expulsion from Heaven, combined with the story of the Fall of Adam. Sievers concluded from the language that this Genesis B poem had originally been written in Old Saxon in North Germany. Twenty years later a few lines of just such an Old Saxon poem were discovered in the Vatican. Probably the translation into Old English (the two languages are very similar) was done in the time of King Alfred.

It seem almost impossible that Milton was not influenced by this poem, particularly the defiant tone of Satan's challenges, which are so effectively sharp:

"Hwaet sceal ic winnan?" cwaed he. "Nis me wihtae thearf  
hearran to habbanne. Ic maeg mid handum swa fela

wundra gewyrcean. Ic haebbe geweald micel  
to gyrwanne godlecran stol,  
hearran on heofne. Hwy sceal ic aefter his hylde deowian,  
bugan him swilces geongordomes? Ic maeg wesan god swa he...

"Why must I labour?" he declared. "There is no need at all for me to have a master. I can work just as many marvels with my hands. I have plenty of power to furnish a godlier throne, one more exalted in heaven. Why must I wait upon his favour and defer to him in such fealty? I can be god as well as he."

In Milton's poem there is a great battle before Satan and his followers are driven out, but here it is instantaneous, and we find them in Hell:

Once he had been an angel of God, bright in heaven,  
until his ambition and his presumption most of all  
deluded him...

Within him ambition welled about his heart;  
without was hot and bitter torment. He spoke:  
"This confining place is most unlike that other  
which once we knew high in the heaven-kingdom  
which my Lord granted me..."

No longer now shall I myself aspire to that heavenly existence, that blessed state, which he means long to enjoy with the strength of his angels. Never in eternity can we succeed in weakening the resolution of mighty God. Let us then subvert it from the children of men, that heavenly kingdom, now that we cannot have it, and see to it that they forgo his favour..."

And there follows an expanded form of the Temptation story in Genesis, in which Adam resists the snake's beguiling before Eve eats the Fruit, and persuades him to eat as well.

## Heroic Poetry

The heroic ethos that the newly evangelized English poets used, as well as their sense of inevitable doom, was something they found in the heroic poems handed down from the centuries of migration across central Europe. There are historical names found in many heroic poems across northern Europe, and the same stories have been transmitted in different cultures. For example, in 436 the terrible Hun leader Attila destroyed the Burgundian army whose leader was Gundahari (remembered in legends as Guthere or Gunther), the guardian of the treasure of Nibelung, mythical king of a race of Norwegian dwarfs. This story, involving also Hagen and Waldere, enjoyed great popularity. In Germany it took written form in the early 13th century as the *Nibelungenlied*. This inspired Richard Wagner in the 19th century to write his great cycle of operas, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Other stories were celebrated about such historical figures as Eormanric the king of the Goths (died 375), Hygelac the Geat who died in 521, about Ongentheow the Swede, Offa the Angle, Ingeld the Heathobard, Finn the Frisian, Hrothgar the Dane, Alboin the Lombard, Hengest the Dane...

Except perhaps for Hengest, none of these had any connection with England; and they had no connection with one another. They lived at different times, in different areas. Yet the creative memory of oral tradition brought them together in a complex web of stories, creating family relationships, marriage bonds, and above all telling how each one died, often because of a quarrel with someone. Because of the value of personal relationships in a culture with no written laws, it is not surprising that many of these stories tell of deceit, betrayal, and treachery.

In England almost none of the stories have survived, if they were ever written down at all; yet all the names mentioned above are found in English heroic works. There are fragments of poems called *Deor*, *Widsith*, *Finnsburgh*, *Waldere*; only *Beowulf* exists as a complete work



(3182 lines) of epic dimensions. The one manuscript in which *Beowulf* exists was copied in the years 950-1000, but the poem may (or may not) be much older. It may be associated with the court of King Offa who ruled Mercia (central England) from 757 until 796, and was partly responsible for unifying the English, calling himself *rex totius Anglorum patriae* (king of the land of all the Angles).

When and how did the stories found in *Beowulf* reach England? It is not possible to say. We do not know in what form they came, or how the poem was originally performed. In *Beowulf*, after Beowulf has killed Grendel, there is a celebration in the hall, and the text says: "There was song and music together, the wooden harp touched, tale oft told, when Hrothgar's *scop* should speak hall-pastime among the mead-benches..." and there follows a fragment from the story of Finn. Similarly in Homer's *Odyssey*, when Odysseus arrives at the court of Alcinous, "the minstrel's fine voice was heard above the music of his lyre" and Odysseus weeps on hearing the story of his own exploits at the fall of Troy.

In their oral stage, such stories were probably recited by special singers (called *scop* in Old English) to a musical accompaniment. However, the poem called *Beowulf* is long and complex, and it comes to us in the form of a written text. The action takes place in the Danish island of Zealand and in southern Sweden, in pre-Christian times; yet in its present form the narration contains Christian features, there are references to the Old Testament, and to God. The setting is entirely Scandinavian, yet the poem is written in English, and there are no continental parallels to it. The poem is full of references to more-or-less historical events, yet the hero Beowulf and his enemy Grendel are completely unknown to history, and have mythical features. In many ways *Beowulf* is a puzzle; perhaps partly for that reason, it is often considered worth reading in a way that no other Old English poem is.

## *Beowulf*

The exact date of the poem cannot be fixed. It claims to record events of the 6th century, many scholars have dated it to the 8th century, others think it is not much earlier than its 10th century manuscript. It is certainly the earliest existing European poem written in a post-Roman vernacular, predating anything found in France, Germany, or Scandinavia.

The poem has three main climaxes, each of them a fight between Beowulf and a monster. It begins by introducing the Danes of Zealand, also called the Scyldings; several generations quickly pass, and Hrothgar is introduced. He has had much military success, so he builds a hall for his followers, calling it Heorot (hart). But soon arises the mysterious figure of Grendel, who is disturbed by and hates the sounds of mirth emerging from the hall. He attacks by night and establishes a reign of terror so that for twelve winters Heorot lies empty. Hrothgar cannot fight against Grendel.

At last a thane of Hygelac, whose name we later learn is Beowulf, hears of this, and crosses the sea, fifteen men in all. He and his companions settle down in Heorot, Beowulf takes off his armour, and lays aside his sword, determined to fight with Grendel on equal terms.

Grendel arrives, hungry. He devours one of Beowulf's men, then Beowulf tears off Grendel's entire arm. The next morning they follow the blood as far as the lake into which he has disappeared.

A celebration is held in Heorot. During this the *scop* sings part of the popular tales about Finn the Frisian, how a quarrel at a banquet while Danes were visiting Finn led to great slaughter; this in turn led to further revenge. Then all lie down to sleep in various buildings, including Heorot.

The mother of Grendel arrives unexpectedly, grabs a Dane, and runs off with him and the arm of Grendel that was hanging in the hall. The next morning, Beowulf sets off in quest of

her underwater lair. He dives into the water to fight Grendel's mother inside a house deep beneath the lake. For hours they fight. At last Beowulf seizes a magic sword and kills her.

His friends have given up all hope, when suddenly Beowulf appears, with Grendel's head. There is more rejoicing in Heorot. Beowulf and his Geats return home.

A new story begins. Beowulf has been king of the Geats for fifty years. A sleeping dragon has been disturbed and is terrorizing the neighborhood. Beowulf sets out to fight the dragon. Only one thane, Wiglaf, will help his king. The dragon seizes Beowulf by the neck, but together they kill it. Beowulf is terribly wounded and soon dies. Beowulf's body is burned on a great pyre, the ashes are covered with a mound, and the final poetic memorial is given: "They said that he was of world-kings the mildest of men and the gentlest, kindest to his people, and most eager for fame":

cwaedon thaet he waere    wyruldcyninga  
mannum mildust    ond mondwaerust,  
leodum lidost    ond lofgeornost.

This last word is often discussed, readers are left wondering whether to be eager for fame and praise is a good thing or not! The narrator of the poem seems not to offer a clear answer. Beowulf is shown as a man of courage and honesty, ready to fight for the interests of his people. Yet he, like everyone else, must come to an end, and die.

The theme of the later part of the poem is elegiac, the mood is dark, and full of foreboding. Not only Beowulf, but his Geatish nation will disappear from history. There is regret, which follows from the admiration the poem seems to express, for the purity of this pagan heroism; yet at the same time, the social and political background to all Beowulf's exploits is far from ideal.

The strong contrast between the folklore of the three heroic fights, against the giant, the underwater spirit, and the dragon, and the complicated atmosphere of distrust and delayed revenge in the real world of all the courts, seems fundamental to the poem, which operates at several different levels at the same time. One major question is whether Beowulf is proposed as a model, or as a warning!

*Beowulf* is marked by very artificial grammatical constructions, by the use of many rare words in its special vocabulary, and by formulaic expressions that are found in other Old English poems. The basic pattern is the traditional alliterative form of Germanic heroic verse, in which two-stress short lines are linked by a pattern of alliteration (usually the two stressed syllables in the first half-line alliterate with the first stressed syllable in the second) to form one long line with a caesura. Beyond this, there are multiple patterns, with a varying number of extra syllables, and the fundamental scheme of the poetry involves a slow build-up of effects by the juxtaposition of many formulaic expressions.

## The Elegies

Old English elegy seems to spring from heroic society's experience of history as glory and loss. It may perhaps best be seen as a poetic expression of human fragility, of the pain of the loss of what deserved not to be lost. It is also strongly marked by an experience of human solitude, the speaker being isolated from normal social existence.

As we saw in the later parts of *Beowulf*, there is a way of viewing life in this world as a combination of glory and doom that does not look beyond the tomb, but leads the reader of the poem back to the poem, since what had to die is yet memorialized and thus perpetuated in the elegiac text itself.

That the poetics of temporality and transience should be so strongly present at so early

a stage of English poetry is striking. It is part of the interest of *Beowulf* that the exploits by which the hero achieves memory/fame are not on the same level as the historical events characterizing the mutability of the human world in which he lives. Like the speakers of the Old English elegies, Beowulf in the end finds himself more or less alone with his fate.

Although *Beowulf* and the *Dream of the Rood* both have elegiac features, the poems which are generally termed *elegies* are all found in one manuscript. The Exeter Book was given to the library of the Cathedral at Exeter (Devon) by Leofric, the first bishop, who died in 1072. It was probably written about a century before this. It contains over thirty Old English poems, as well as almost a hundred short riddles. Some of the poems it contains are religious, such as *Christ*, *The Judgement Day*, or saints' lives, but it also includes some of the oldest heroic fragments, like *Widsith* and *Deor*. The most famous elegies are *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Ruin*.

The elegies have been especially popular in the 20th century, because their suggestive evocations of what seem to be intense individual experience are close to the dramatic monologues which Robert Browning developed in the 19th century and which represent one major form of modern lyric poetry. Ezra Pound ventured to write his own version of *The Seafarer*, freer than a strict translation since he knew little Old English.

*The Seafarer* depicts a situation of mysterious isolation, the speaker is seemingly adrift in a boat. Much the same motif is found in *The Wanderer*, in which the general moral application of the poem is clearer, and the rhetorical development more varied. Some critics consider that the Christian passages at the beginning and end were added later but this is not very likely. The central figure has lost his social role and finds no replacement; misfortune drives him to meditate on the transience of all human societies. He contemplates the ruins of abandoned Roman towns and tries to imagine what life in them was like.

Hwaer cwom mearg? Hwaer cwom mago?  
Hwaer cwom maththumgyfa?  
Hwaer cwom symbla gesetu? Hwaer sindon seledreamas?  
Eala beorht bune! Eala byrnwiga!  
Eala theodnes thrym! Hu seo thrag gewat,  
henap under nihthelm, swa heo no waere.

Where did the horse go?  
Where the bold youth?  
Where is the treasure-giver?  
Where is the feast-place?  
Where the hall's bliss?  
Alas, bright cup! Alas, man of arms!  
Alas, the lord's might! How those days have gone,  
dark under night, as if they never had been.  
(...)  
So spoke the man whose heart was wise,  
sitting apart at the council-meeting.  
The good man does not break his word,  
and one should never speak before one knows  
what will truly bring relief,  
such is a leader with his courage.  
And all will be well for the one who seeks  
favor and comfort from the Father above,  
with whom alone all stability dwells.

This poem shows signs of contact with the Latin poetic traditions of rhetoric; in the middle of the poem are these lines expressing a motif known in Latin as *ubi sunt*, evoking objects and people lost thanks to the passage of time. In Latin one of the poem's main themes is expressed as *sic transit gloria mundi* (thus this world's glory passes away); the entire Mutability tradition in English poetry begins with *Beowulf* and the elegies, although for

centuries they lay quite unknown, unread in their manuscripts.

## The Vikings

The process of social stabilization led naturally and at once to the growth of laws and an ordered society; royal justice was designed to limit the harm one person could do to another, and to take the place of the personal revenge that *Beowulf* seems to criticize. The Angles and Saxons had already settled, and had begun to feel some kind of national identity as the English, united under kings such as Offa.

This did not last, however. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden, groups speaking a North Germanic range of dialects began to show a high level of outreaching ambition. Their boats were large, they were tradesmen, and pirates. Some groups left their home in Sweden, moving in a south-easterly direction; one group reached Constantinople, while another, the Rus, settled in the great central plains, adopted the Slavonic language, and founded Russia.

When Charlemagne made the Frisians in north-west Germany part of his Frankish kingdom, he weakened their domination of the northern seas. Since England had not developed a strong navy, this meant that there was no opposition to the people living in Norway and Denmark when they came sailing across to northern England looking for plunder.

Unfortunately, the richest places near the sea were the monasteries of Northumbria, and the western Scottish islands. The first attackers, from Norway, destroyed Lindisfarne and Jarrow in 793-4. Not being Christians, they had no respect for churches when they found them full of golden treasure. The books in the libraries were of no interest to them, they could not read, so they no doubt burned them.

The word Viking was introduced into English in the 19th century, although it was used in Old English, and today there is much interest in them, perhaps because they have enjoyed such a bad reputation in the past. In recent years the remains of Viking houses in the city of York have become a very popular museum. Those found in Dublin were destroyed in redevelopment. The word Vik-ing may mean "market-place-people" because what was stolen in one place was probably sold in another. It may be better, though, to use the words "Norsemen" and "Danes". These attacks are really the beginning of the Danish settlement in England.

At first the Danes only came to steal and destroy, beginning in Kent in 835. By 855 groups were spending the winter in camps on the islands at the mouth of the Thames and in 865 a large army arrived to settle permanently in York and East Anglia. In 875 the Danes took control of Northumbria and Mercia, others captured Exeter in the south-west for a time before withdrawing again. New groups were all the time arriving across the North Sea from Denmark. The attacks were not limited to England, for the Norwegian Rollo began to attack the French coast in 876, and there was a great siege of Paris in 885-6. There were no armies capable of resisting.

## King Alfred the Great

At this time the kingdom of Wessex in the South was independent. In 871 Alfred became king, at the age of twenty-four, and began negotiations with the invaders, while enlarging his army and for the first time building a fleet of fighting ships.

Alfred is the first great English folk-hero, although the British Arthur has taken his place in literature. In early 878 Alfred seemed completely defeated; he retreated into the marshes of Athelney (Somerset) with a small group of thanes. While hiding there he is said to have been scolded by a peasant woman, when he let the bread he was watching for her burn, so busy he

was thinking of ways to save England. "Alfred burned the cakes" is proverbial, and he was a man of deep thought.

Alfred emerged from this muddy hole after two months, gathered a volunteer army, and two weeks later had completely defeated the Danes. Perhaps the Danes realized the interest of this defeat; their king Guthrum became a Christian, Alfred's god-son, staying with him at Wedmore. Later he and his army were allowed to go and settle in East Anglia, away from Wessex. In the Treaty of Wedmore, the Danes solemnly recognized the king of Wessex as king of all England and this prepared the way for their eventual assimilation.

From this moment onwards England was culturally divided. North of the Thames was called Danelaw and most of the Danes settled here, first in the Northumbrian region, then in East Anglia. They took lands, mostly, that the Angles had not been farming, and therefore lived alongside the earlier villages and farms, in a parallel social system. South of the Thames, the Saxons of Wessex represented the older national tradition, supporting also the rights of the Angles living under Danelaw. In the end, the cultural and social influence of Wessex penetrated the North, thanks to Alfred, although most Danes had little sympathy with Christianity.

When he was thirty-five, Alfred realized that his own education was lacking, so he began to learn Latin. At this time all the monasteries and churches of the north, with their libraries and schools, had been destroyed. Those surviving in the south were almost lifeless. At the end of his wars with the Danes, Alfred realized that the *Angelcynn* (the family of the Angles) were in great danger of losing all culture. Even in the Church there was nobody who knew Latin; he saw that the survival of his people as a nation demanded education, and that there was no hope if the education involved an unknown language such as Latin.

Alfred therefore set up a Palace School modelled on that of Alcuin in Aachen, with a few scholars he brought over from Europe. With them he started a programme of translation from Latin into Old English, choosing books which would help establish a new spirit of wisdom and holiness in the Church of his country, and so in his people. Alfred himself did most of the work on at least some texts, soon after 890, and it is right to see him as the "Father of English Prose" for there was almost no Old English prose written before him. Equally, his work allowed a far deeper synthesis of the Latin tradition with the Germanic. He chose the works to translate in function of their usefulness to his political and social vision.

First he made a version in English of Pope Gregory the Great's *Cura Pastoralis*, a guide for bishops as pastors of the Christian people. This was followed by Orosius's *Universal History*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, and a very free version of St Augustine's *Soliloquies*. He also translated the Psalms. In the copy of Gregory's work that survives, dated 891, there is a Preface by Alfred describing how he came to the decision to translate from Latin into English:

We should translate certain books which are most necessary for all to know, into the language that we can all understand, and also arrange it, as with God's help we very easily can if we have peace, so that all the youth of free men now among the English people, who have the means to be able to devote themselves to it, may be set to study for as long as they are no other use, until the time they are able to read English writing well... I began amidst other various and manifold cares of this kingdom to translate into English the book which is called *Pastoralis*...

Even more important was the decision he made, influenced by Orosius and Bede, to establish the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. First a summary of world history, and of English history until 891, was made in English. Then copies of this were sent to the different parts of the kingdom, where major social events continued to be noted more or less systematically until Old English ceased to exist. There are seven different versions of the Chronicle, the most complete being that kept in Peterborough, which only stops in 1154. No other country in Europe kept such a complete historical record in the vernacular for so long.

## The Monastic Revival

After the death of Alfred in 899, for almost fifty years the Scandinavians continued to bring trouble to England. Norwegians who settled in Ireland, where Dublin was a major Viking centre, entered the North of England, fighting the Danes and installing a temporary king in York. They were finally driven out in 954, when they turned to the French coast in their search for settlement-areas. There they had allies in the Norsemen settled in land that had been granted to the Christian Norwegian Rollo in 911, after his many attacks launched against that part of France from Exeter. This is the origin of Normandy (place of the North-men/Norse-men) where the Normans soon adopted the surrounding French dialect, and attained political unity, having close links with the countries to the north and with England.

After 955 attacks against England ceased for twenty-five years. In 959 Edgar became king of Wessex. He was a devout Christian, at this time there were several strong Church leaders in the main monasteries of his kingdom. The most noted was Dunstan, of Glastonbury in Somerset. These men were influenced by a renewal of strict monastic life in the French centres of Cluny and Fleury at this time. Each of them became bishop, Dunstan became Archbishop of Canterbury, with great influence; he composed the service for the Coronation of the English king which is still used.

The most important cultural consequence was the renewal of book-copying, based in the monastery in Winchester. All the main manuscripts of Old English poetry and almost all those containing prose were copied at this time, between 955 and 1000. The four major poetry books contain mostly much older works, those that we have seen and others; very little new poetry was written at this time, it is hard to know why.

In addition, though, in the one hundred and forty or so manuscripts containing Old English that survive, we find an explosion of new writing in prose. The favourite genre is the Sermon. Two great writers stand out: Aelfric and Wulfstan. Aelfric, who wrote a series of splendid *Catholic Homilies* to be read on the main Church feasts such as Easter, is a master of prose rhythms. Wulfstan's sermon called *Sermo Lupi* dates from 1014, and is mainly of interest because it is a thoughtful response to the terrible social crisis that England was then experiencing.

## From Maldon to Hastings

In 991, after several years of small raids, an army arrived off the east coast of England. At this time Denmark and Norway were a single kingdom, and had just become Christian by royal decision. The new faith had little influence on the behaviour of this very fierce people. The first battle of the English resistance to the new Norse invasion is known to us in detail because it was made the subject of a new heroic poem, today called *The Battle of Maldon*. This must have been written soon after, by someone close to the incident, and it is full of the traditional verbal formulae of heroic poems such as *Beowulf*. It is the last important Old English poem.

The English leader Byrhtnoth found the Danish invaders trapped on an island in East Anglia connected with the mainland by a narrow passage. He could easily have slaughtered them all, but in a noble gesture he allowed them to cross unharmed so that the two armies could fight on equal terms. Ironically, he died and the English were defeated. He possesses the traditional heroic pride with its accompanying doom; the courage that the outnumbered English lords display in their speeches is a fine expression of national resistance:

"Courage shall grow keener, clearer the will,  
The heart fiercer, as our force grows less.  
Here our lord lies levelled in the dust,  
The man all marred: he shall mourn to the end  
Who thinks to wend off from this war-play now.  
Though I am white with winters I will not away,  
For I think to lodge me alongside my dear one,  
Lay me down by my lord's right hand."

After this, the English realized that they could not defeat the Danes and began to try to buy them off, giving them huge sums of money to go away. This *Danegeld* was a disaster, since new armies kept coming and demanding more. The old king of Wessex, Ethelred, (king since 978) tried to lead resistance, but without success, and he died in 1016. By the time that a Dane, Cnut, was recognized as King of All England in 1017, the country had paid over 250,000 pounds in Danegeld, and all but a few areas had been ravaged.

Cnut was at the same time King of Denmark and Norway, almost all the powerful men in England were Danes. Stability was restored and in many ways life was better, laws were improved, the Church was at last able to exist safely, although few people in northern England could be considered Christian. Yet after Cnut's death in 1035, the Danes were unable to provide a stable succession, and in 1042 the son of Ethelred was unanimously elected king; his name was Edward. After his death he was considered a saint, and called Edward the Confessor. He founded a monastery on the Thames above London, it was known as West Minster; his body is still there, in the church now known as Westminster Abbey. The palace Edward built beside the monastery, the Palace of Westminster, has been the home of the English Parliament since the Middle Ages.

Edward opened the way for the Norman Conquest of England, and has therefore been seen by official history as a good king. He made defence treaties with Normandy, then destroyed the English fleet; he introduced Normans into powerful positions. He even named William Duke of Normandy as his successor, but when he died in January 1066 the Witan, the traditional national Assembly, elected Harold as king. Harold was from a powerful English family, and he had long been active as a military leader dealing with uprisings and invasions. During Harold's months in power England was invaded once again by Norwegians led by a man called Harold Hardrada; what is striking about him is that he had already held power in Sicily, Asia Minor, and Persia. He fared less well in England, it took twenty-four boats to carry home the dead!

In September 1066, the Duke of Normandy, William, landed in England to claim the crown that Edward had promised him. He prepared a camp near Hastings, on the South coast, and waited. On October 14, Harold joined battle with an English army he had marched down from the North, and that was not really ready. During the day an arrow struck Harold in the eye, it seems, he was killed and William took power. He was crowned king of England in Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day 1066. From that moment, England began to be treated as an occupied colony; William oppressed the population of Northern England, especially, with very great cruelty. Everywhere he gave his fellow-Normans lands that legally belonged to the English. Not surprisingly, he is known as William the Conqueror.

Since the Normans spoke a dialect of French, there was very limited communication between the native English and their new lords. The Normans finally imposed a system of feudalism that robbed most people in the villages of almost every right, and although some parts of Western England preserved the writing of Old English for another century, there was not very much to write about. When the vernacular began to be written again, it had become a simpler tongue, already recognizably Middle English.

## The Celtic tradition: Ireland, Scotland, Wales

The Celtic-speaking peoples of Ireland seem to have arrived there in about 300 BC. By the beginning of the Christian era the land was divided into five kingdoms and there was trade with the Roman empire, although the Romans never controlled Hibernia (its Latin name). The time after 350, when Roman control over Britain was weakening, saw many Irish leaving to settle along the west coasts of Wales, England, and Scotland. They also made raids and took slaves, it seems, since Ireland's national saint, Patrick, is said to have been first taken there in this way. After six years as a herdsman, he escaped and became a monk in Gaul then felt called to go back to Ireland as a missionary. Patrick is said to have converted the whole of Ireland (and to have freed it of snakes), although there were some Christians there before him.

The Irish Scots who landed in west Scotland drove back the native Picts they found there, and by the 9th century had taken control of the whole country, giving it their name and firmly establishing it as a kingdom separate from England. At least one group of Pictish refugees sought refuge by fleeing into Northern Wales, where their family genealogies were preserved, including the name of Drust, who was to become Tristan in later romantic development.

The original Welsh seem to have come from the area of the Mediterranean, then Celts brought them their Brythonic (British) language (as opposed to the Goidelic variety of Celtic spoken in Ireland, and called Gaelic in Scotland). The Romans colonized at least parts of Wales, British resistance to the Anglo-Saxon invasions helped to form the separate Welsh identity (the Welsh name for Wales is "Cymru" and it means "companions"). In the time of Offa of Mercia the frontier was fixed by the construction of Offa's Dyke. Under the influence of the Irish invasions of the 5th century, many Welsh with their fellow-Celts from Cornwall left to make a new home in the Armorican Peninsula (Brittany) in France, giving it the name Little Britain. This emigration was further encouraged by the later Viking raids. The people of French Brittany still speak a form of Brythonic, and can understand the Welsh language.

The earliest history of Britain was written in Wales by Gildas in Latin before 547, he laments how weak the British have become. He mentions a great victory of British resistance to the Anglo-Saxon invaders at Mount Badon. Some fifty years later the first known Welsh poet, the bard Aneirin, composed *Y Gododdin* as an elegy lamenting Welsh nobles who fell fighting the Saxons. There we find for the first time the name of Arthur. Around 830 the historian Nennius in his *Historia Britonum* gives a list of twelve battles Arthur fought as *dux bellorum*, and the 10th century *Annales Cambriae* (Welsh Annals) say that the battle of Mount Badon took place in 518, while the battle of Camlan, "in which Arthur and Medraut fell" is mentioned, dated to 539. Clearly the legends of Arthur originally developed in Wales.

The traditional poets of Wales are known as bards. Their art was oral and inspired. A bard would withdraw for a time of meditation in solitude, before emerging with a new poem. Welsh poetry is marked by rich patterns of rhythm and internal rhyme. Most of the manuscripts containing Welsh poetry are later, but the name of Taliesin is mentioned in texts of genealogies as having lived about 550; there are many later poems said to be by him. One common form of Welsh poem is the triad in which three names or three events are evoked. Some of the triads suggest that there were longer narrative forms that have not survived.

In Ireland many monasteries developed as the main form of Christian living. Missionaries went out from them, to Scotland (Columba founded Iona in 563), to Northumbria, and especially to European lands including Switzerland. The most significant work of the monasteries was the production of books. Some, like the Book of Kells, are among the most beautiful of all illuminated manuscripts, with very wonderful ornaments painted on the pages. In the monasteries, too, lives of saints and historical records were written, first in Latin, but later in Irish.



In 895 Vikings began to settle in Ireland in large numbers, causing much damage. This lasted until 1014, when they were driven out by a popular uprising and a united kingship was established. In 1171, Henry II of England was encouraged by the Pope and the Holy German Emperor to take Ireland into his kingdom. He invaded it and during the Middle Ages Ireland was never again independent, although most of the Anglo-Normans who went over to live there were integrated into Irish society.

Irish folk tales survived for many centuries in oral form, partly in defiance of the English domination. They are truly popular tales, marked with tremendous vigour, combining the heroic with the comic. Among the most famous are the stories about Cuchulain (pronounced Choolin) nephew of King Conchubar of Ulster in the first century. Like Hercules, he showed great strength as a baby, killing a terrible watchdog and taking its place. He was famed (and loved by women) for having defended Ulster against the attack of Queen Medb (Meve) of Connaught who longed to carry off the Brown Bull of Cuailgne (Cooley). He was killed when he was still young, in an act of revenge.

The other great Irish cycle involves Finn, his father Cumal and his son Oisín (or Ossian); they are dated to the third century but the stories are quite mythological. Finn is characterized by truth, wisdom, and generosity; he is therefore put in charge of a band of warriors of special strength, and there are many heroic tales of their adventures. Finn was ill-fated in love, though. He fell in love with Grainne but she eloped with his nephew. There are long stories of the pursuit by Finn of the two lovers that have some relationship with the Tristan story. Finn accepted the situation, but later caused his nephew's death.

Another aspect of these tales is seen in the story of Niamh's love for Oisín; she is the daughter of the sea-god, and carries off Oisín to live with her for three hundred years, then he is allowed to visit his native land, riding a magic steed, but must not get off. He forgets, touches ground, and at once becomes blind, an infinitely old man.

## Further Reading

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