Anglo-Saxons History and Background

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Anglo-Saxon
History and Background

By Awais Shaikh

INTRODUCTION

English Literature was actually started with Anglo-Saxon literature, so that they can be called as forefathers of English literature. They were actually a group of Germanic peoples who, from the 5th century CE to the time of the Norman Conquest (1066), inhabited and ruled territories that are today part of England and Wales.

The Anglo-Saxon works include genres such as epic poetry, hagiography, sermons, Bible translations, legal works, chronicles, riddles, and others. In all there are about 400 surviving manuscripts from the period, a significant corpus of both popular interest and specialist research.

Some of the most important works from this period include the poem Beowulf, which has achieved national epic status in Britain. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a collection of early English history. The poem Cædmon's Hymn from the 7th century is one of the oldest surviving written texts in English.

A large number of manuscripts remain from the 600 year Anglo-Saxon period, with most written during the last 300 years (9th–11th century), in both Latin and the vernacular. Old English literature is among the oldest vernacular languages to be written down. Old English began, in written form, as a practical necessity in the aftermath of the Danish

invasions—church officials were concerned that because of the drop in Latin literacy no one could read their work. Likewise King Alfred the Great (849– 899), wanting to restore English culture, lamented the poor state of Latin education:

"So general was [educational] decay in England that there were very few on this side of the Humber who could…translate a letter from Latin into English; and I believe there were not many beyond the Humber" (Pastoral Care, introduction).

King Alfred noted that while very few could read Latin, many could still read Old English. He thus proposed that students be educated in Old English, and those who excelled would go on to learn Latin. In this way many of the texts that have survived are typical teaching and student-oriented texts.

In total there are about 400 surviving manuscripts containing Old English text, 189 of them considered major. These manuscripts have been highly prized by collectors since the 16th century, both for their historic value and for their aesthetic beauty of uniformly spaced letters and decorative elements.

Not all of the texts can be fairly called literature, such as lists of names or aborted pen trials. However those that can present a sizable body of work, listed here in descending order of quantity: sermons and saints' lives (the most numerous), biblical translations; translated Latin works of the early Church Fathers; Anglo-Saxon chronicles and narrative history works; laws, wills and other legal works; practical works on grammar, medicine, geography; lastly, but not least important, poetry.

Nearly all Anglo-Saxon authors are anonymous, with some exceptions.

English was the common tongue of Angles and Saxons before Occupied Britain. Before they occupied Britain they lived along coasts of Sweden and Denmark and the occupied land was called Eagle-Land (England)

Background

There were two other languages in Anglo-Saxon era. As, Latin and Greek. Latin was spoken by church related (clergyman) and Greek by Rich and Royals. Then Old English began.

Brief History

According to St. Bede the Venerable, the Anglo-Saxons were the descendants of three different Germanic peoples—the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. By Bede's account, those peoples originally migrated from northern Germany to the island of Britain in the 5th century at the invitation of Vortigern, a ruler of Britons, to help defend his kingdom against marauding invasions by the Picts and Scotti, who occupied what is now Scotland. Archaeological evidence suggests that the first migrants from the Germanic areas of mainland Europe included settlers from Frisia and antedated the Roman withdrawal from Britain about 410 CE. Their subsequent settlements in what is now England laid the foundation for the later kingdoms of Essex, Sussex, and Wessex (Saxons); East Anglia, Middle Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria (Angles); and Kent (Jutes). Ethnically, the Anglo-Saxons actually represented an admixture of Germanic peoples with Britain's preexisting Celtic inhabitants and subsequent Viking and Danish invaders. These tribes were fearless, adventurous and brave. They slang at their feast about battles, gods and their ancestral heroes and some of their chiefs were bards (poets). Their songs were about religion, wars and agriculture and English poetry began from these songs.

Old English Poetry

Old English Poetry is of two types, the heroic Germanic pre-Christian and the Christian. It has survived for the most part in four manuscripts. The first manuscript is called the Junius manuscript (also known as the Caedmon manuscript), which is an illustrated poetic anthology. The second manuscript is called the Exeter Book, also an anthology, located in the Exeter Cathedral since it was donated there in the 11th century. The third manuscript is called the Vercelli Book, a mix of poetry and prose; how it came to be in Vercelli, Italy, no one knows, and is a matter of debate. The fourth manuscript is called the Nowell Codex, also a mixture of poetry and prose.

Old English poetry had no known rules or system left to us by the Anglo-Saxons, everything we know about it is based on modern analysis. The first widely accepted theory was by Eduard Sievers (1885) in which he distinguished five distinct alliterative patterns. The theory of John C. Pope (1942) uses musical notations which has had some acceptance; every few years a new theory arises and the topic continues to be hotly debated.

The most popular and well known understanding of Old English poetry continues to be Sievers' alliterative verse. The system is based upon accent, alliteration, the quantity of vowels, and patterns of syllabic accentuation. It consists of five permutations on a base verse scheme; any one of the five types can be used in any verse. The system was inherited from and exists in one form or another in all of the older Germanic languages. Two poetic figures commonly found in Old English poetry are the Kenning, an often formulaic phrase that describes one thing in terms of another, e.g. in Beowulf, the sea is called the swan's road and Litotes, a dramatic understatement employed by the author for ironic effect.

Old English poetry was an oral craft, and our understanding of it in written form is incomplete; for example, we know that the poet (referred to as the Scop) could be accompanied by a harp, and there may be other aural traditions we are not aware of.

Poetry represents the smallest amount of the surviving Old English text, but Anglo-Saxon culture had a rich tradition of oral story-telling, just not much was written down or survived.

1. Dialects

The peoples of each of the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms spoke distinctive dialects, which evolved over time and together became known as Old English. Within that variety of dialects, an exceptionally rich vernacular literature emerged. Examples include the masterful epic poem Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a collection of manuscripts that cover events in the early history of England.

The four main dialects are as follows:

- Northumbrian (North Dialect - The first dialect)

- Merican (The Language of Midlands)
- Kentish (The Language of South-East)
- Alfred The Great (The Language of West Saxon)

2. Fivel Principles of Anglo-Saxon

- Responsiveness to nature
- Love to personal freedom
- Love for religion
- Love for womanhood
- Struggle for glory

3. Famous Works

The most famous work of The Anglo-Saxon era is Beowulf whose writer is still not known. It is actually an epic and has national epic's status in *England*. Other major poetics are

- Exeter Books
- Junius Manuscript
- Vercelli Book
- **Beowulf**

4. Famous Writers/Poets

There were some Writers/ Poets who have written much in the Anglo-Saxon era. The first two are most famous.

- **Caedmon**
- **Cynewulf**
- Bede
- Alfred The Great
- Aelfric

Caedmon (658-680)

First Old English Christian poet, whose fragmentary hymn to the creation remains a symbol of the adaptation of the aristocratic-heroic Anglo-Saxon verse tradition to the expression of Christian themes. His story is known from Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People, which tells how Caedmon, an illiterate herdsman, retired from company one night in shame because he could not comply with the demand made of each guest to sing. Then in a dream a stranger appeared commanding him to sing of "the beginning of things," and the herdsman found himself uttering "verses which he had never heard." When Caedmon awoke he related his dream to the farm bailiff under whom he worked and was conducted by him to the monastery at Streaneshalch (now called Whitby). The abbess St. Hilda believed that Caedmon was divinely inspired and, to test his powers, proposed that he should render into verse a portion of sacred history, which the monks explained. By the following morning he had fulfilled the task. At the request of the abbess he became an inmate of the monastery. Throughout the remainder of his life his more learned brethren expounded Scripture to him, and all that he heard he reproduced in vernacular poetry. All of his poetry was on sacred themes, and its unvarying aim was to turn men from sin to righteousness. In spite of all the poetic renderings that Caedmon supposedly made, however, it is only the original dream hymn of nine historically precious, but poetically uninspired, lines that can be attributed to him with confidence. The hymn—extant in 17 manuscripts, some in the poet's Northumbrian dialect, some in other Old English dialects—set the pattern for almost the whole art of Anglo-Saxon verse.

Caedmon is the best-known and considered the father of Old English poetry. He lived at the abbey of Whitby in Northumbria in the 7th century. Only a single nine line poem remains, called Hymn, which is also the oldest surviving text in English:

Cædmon's Hymn

Now let us praise the Guardian of the Kingdom of Heaven

the might of the Creator and the thought of his mind,

the work of the glorious Father, how He, the eternal Lord

established the beginning of every wonder.

For the sons of men, He, the Holy Creator

first made heaven as a roof, then the

Keeper of mankind, the eternal Lord

God Almighty afterwards made the middle world

the earth, for men.

--(Caedmon, Hymn, Leningrad manuscript)

Cynewulf (8th-9th Century)

Cynewulf also spelled Cynwulf or Kynewulf, (flourished 9th century AD, Northumbria or Mercia [now in England]), author of four Old English poems preserved in late 10th-century manuscripts. Elene and The Fates of the Apostles are in the Vercelli Book, and The Ascension (which forms the second part of a trilogy, Christ, and is also called Christ II) and Juliana are in the Exeter Book. An epilogue to each poem, asking for prayers for the author, contains runic characters representing the letters c, y, n, (e), w, u, l, f, which are thought to spell his name. A rhymed passage in the Elene shows that Cynewulf wrote in the Northumbrian or Mercian dialect. Nothing is known of him outside his poems, as there is no reason to identify him with any of the recorded persons bearing this common name. He may have been a learned cleric since all of the poems are based on Latin sources.

Elene, a poem of 1,321 lines, is an account of the finding of the True Cross by St. Helena.

The Fates of the Apostles, 122 lines, is a versified martyrology describing the mission and death of each of the Twelve Apostles.

Christ II (The Ascension) is a lyrical version of a homily on the Ascension written by Pope Gregory I the Great. It is part of a trilogy on Christ by different authors.

Juliana, a poem of 731 lines, is a retelling of a Latin prose life of St. Juliana, a maiden who rejected the suit of a Roman prefect, Eleusius, because of her faith and consequently was made to suffer numerous torments.

Although the poems do not have great power or originality, they are more than mere paraphrases. Imagery from everyday Old English life and from the Germanic epic tradition enlivens descriptions of battles and sea voyages. At the same time, the poet, a careful and skillful craftsman, consciously applies the principles of Latin rhetoric to achieve a clarity and orderly narrative progress that is quite unlike the confusion and circumlocution of the native English style.

Difference between Cædmon and Cynewulf

The contribution of both Caedmonian and Cynewulf to the growth of Anglo-Saxon Christian poetry is in fact undeniable. Yet these two poets as their works indicate are not of the same order or type one is a native poet with a spontaneous inspiration while the other is an artist, with scholarly acquirement and artistic imagination whereas Caedmonian poetry may be Characterised as old Christian poetry, Cynewulf stands as the new Caedmon represent a groups of poems earlier in tone and feelings than that which is generally attributed to Cynewulf.

The distinctions between these two classes of Christian poetry however is clearly discernible In Caedmonian poetry , the representation is of the Bible in the old form, as the old testament is Caedmon's materials in Cynewulf, the representation of Christ and the account of his suffering and triumph are made with a sort of epical grandeur. The new testament is the materials for his works.

Cynewulfian poetry marks definitely an advance upon the Caedmonian school. Caedmon's poetry is a sort of hymns in praise of the creator and his creation, whereas Cynewulf is the self-revelation of a soul in the pursuit of spiritual life . In Cynewulfian poetry, the inspiration of Christianity , are not simply Christ. The poet is found here mainly concerned with the stories of saints and martyrs of the inspiration of the new testament. Christ is celebrated in new poetry as a savior and the poetic spirit here is rather elegiac than epical . Again, Caedmonian poetry is narrative and relates the story of creation and other biblical accounts. But Cynewulfian poetry is reflective and as indicated in the Dream of the Rood, lyrical. The advance of the latter group is also frequently marked in the description of nature. There is seen the spiritual vision of nature in Cynewulf , but this is very rare in Caedmon. It is the poetry of future, and not of the past and present only .

There is also the distinction between the two in regard to the poetic style. Caedmon’s natural poetry is simple, straight forward and definitely easily convincing. But Cynewulf is a poetic artist and his poetry is rich in artistic graces. In variety, profundity and sonority , Cynewulfian poetry is definitely superior to Caedmonian .

St. Bede The Venerable (672/73-735)

Bede also spelled Baeda or Beda, (born 672/673, traditionally Monkton in Jarrow, Northumbria [England]—died May 25, 735, Jarrow; canonized 1899; feast day May 25), Anglo-Saxon theologian, historian, and chronologist. St. Bede is best known for his Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum (“Ecclesiastical History of the English People”), a source vital to the history of the conversion to Christianity of the Anglo-Saxon tribes.

During his lifetime and throughout the Middle Ages, Bede’s reputation was based mainly on his scriptural commentaries, copies of which found their way to many of the monastic libraries of western Europe. The method of dating events from the time of the incarnation, or Christ’s birth—i.e., AD (anno Domini, “in the year of our Lord”)—came into general use through the popularity of the Historia ecclesiastica and the two works on chronology. Bede’s influence was perpetuated at home through the school founded at York by his pupil Archbishop Egbert of York and was transmitted to the rest of Europe by Alcuin, who studied there before becoming master of Charlemagne’s palace school at Aachen.

Nothing is known of Bede’s parentage. At the age of seven he was taken to the monastery of St. Peter at Wearmouth (near Sunderland, Durham), founded by Abbot, St. Benedict Biscop, to whose care he was entrusted. By 685 he was moved to Biscop’s newer monastery, of St. Paul, at Jarrow. Bede was ordained a deacon when 19 years old and priest when 30. Apart from visits to Lindisfarne and York, he seems never to have left Wearmouth–Jarrow. Buried at Jarrow, his remains were removed to Durham and are now entombed in the Galilee Chapel of Durham Cathedral.

Bede’s works fall into three groups: grammatical and “scientific,” scriptural commentary, and historical and biographical. His earliest works included treatises on spelling, hymns, figures of

speech, verse, and epigrams. His first treatise on chronology, De temporibus (“On Times”), with a brief chronicle attached, was written in 703. In 725 he completed a greatly amplified version, De temporum ratione (“On the Reckoning of Time”), with a much longer chronicle. Both these books were mainly concerned with the reckoning of Easter. His earliest biblical commentary was probably that on the Revelation to John (703?–709); in this and many similar works, his aim was to transmit and explain relevant passages from the Fathers of the Church. Although his interpretations were mainly allegorical, treating much of the biblical text as symbolic of deeper meanings, he used some critical judgment and attempted to rationalize discrepancies. Among his most notable are his verse (705–716) and prose (before 721) lives of St. Cuthbert, bishop of Lindisfarne. These works are uncritical and abound with accounts of miracles; a more exclusively historical work is Historia abbatum (c. 725; “Lives of the Abbots”).

In 731/732 Bede completed his Historia ecclesiastica. Divided into five books, it recorded events in Britain from the raids by Julius Caesar (55–54 BCE) to the arrival in Kent (597 CE) of St. Augustine of Canterbury. For his sources, he claimed the authority of ancient letters, the “traditions of our forefathers,” and his own knowledge of contemporary events. Bede’s Historia ecclesiastica leaves gaps tantalizing to secular historians. Although overloaded with the miraculous, it is the work of a scholar anxious to assess the accuracy of his sources and to record only what he regarded as trustworthy evidence. It remains an indispensable source for some of the facts and much of the feel of early Anglo-Saxon history.

Alfred The Great (849-899)

Alfred, also spelled Aelfred, byname Alfred the Great, (born 849—died 899), king of Wessex (871–899), a Saxon kingdom in southwestern England. He prevented England from falling to the Danes and promoted learning and literacy. Compilation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle began during his reign, circa 890.

Alfred is most exceptional, however, not for his generalship or his administration but for his attitude toward learning. He shared the contemporary view that Viking raids were a divine punishment for the people's sins, and he attributed these to the decline of learning, for only through learning could men acquire wisdom and live in accordance with God's will. Hence, in the lull attack between 878 and 885, he invited scholars to his court from Mercia, Wales, and the European continent. He learned Latin himself and began to translate Latin books into English in 887. He directed that all young freemen of adequate means must learn to read English, and, by his own translations and those of his helpers, he made available English versions of "those books most necessary for all men to know," books that would lead them to wisdom and virtue. The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, by the English historian Bede, and the Seven Books of Histories Against the Pagans, by Paulus Orosius, a 5th-century theologian—neither of which was translated by Alfred himself, though they have been credited to him—revealed the divine purpose in history. Alfred's translation of the Pastoral Care of St. Gregory I, the great 6th-century pope, provided a manual for priests in the instruction of their flocks, and a translation by Bishop Werferth of Gregory's Dialogues supplied edifying reading on holy men. Alfred's rendering of the Soliloquies of the 5th-century theologian St. Augustine of Hippo, to

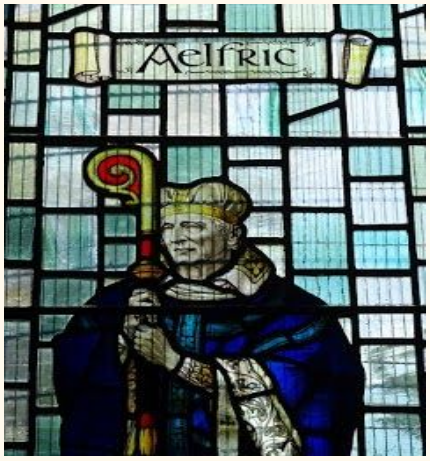
which he added material from other works of the Fathers of the Church, discussed problems concerning faith and reason and the nature of eternal life. This translation deserves to be studied in its own right, as does his rendering of Boethius's Consolation of Philosophy. In considering what is true happiness and the relation of providence to faith and of predestination to free will, Alfred does not fully accept Boethius' position but depends more on the early Fathers. In both works, additions include parallels from contemporary conditions, sometimes revealing his views on the social order and the duties of kingship. Alfred wrote for the benefit of his people, but he was also deeply interested in theological problems for their own sake and commissioned the first of the translations, Gregory's Dialogues, "that in the midst of earthly troubles he might sometimes think of heavenly things." He may also have done a translation of the first 50 psalms. Though not Alfred's work, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, one of the greatest sources of information about Saxon England, which began to be circulated about 890, may have its origin in the intellectual interests awakened by the revival of learning under him. His reign also saw activity in building and in art, and foreign craftsmen were attracted to his court.

In one of his endeavours, however, Alfred had little success; he tried to revive monasticism, founding a monastery and a nunnery, but there was little enthusiasm in England for the monastic life until after the revivals on the European continent in the next century.

Alfred, alone of Anglo-Saxon kings, inspired a full-length biography, written in 893, by the Welsh scholar Asser. This work contains much valuable information, and it reveals that Alfred laboured throughout under the burden of recurrent, painful illness; and beneath Asser's rhetoric can be seen a man of attractive character, full of compassion, able to inspire affection, and intensely conscious of the responsibilities of kingly office. This picture is confirmed by Alfred's laws and writings.

Alfred was never forgotten: his memory lived on through the Middle Ages and in legend as that of a king who won victory in apparently hopeless circumstances and as a wise lawgiver. Some of his works were copied as late as the 12th century. Modern studies have increased knowledge of him but have not altered in its essentials the medieval conception of a great king.

Aelfric (955-1025)



Anglo-Saxon prose writer, considered the greatest of his time. He wrote both to instruct the monks and to spread the learning of the 10th-century monastic revival. His Catholic Homilies, written in 990–992, provided orthodox sermons, based on the Church Fathers. Author of a Latin grammar, hence his nickname Grammaticus, he also wrote Lives of the Saints, Heptateuch (a vernacular language version of the first seven books of the Bible), as well as letters and various treatises.

End of The Anglo-Saxon Era (Battle of Hastings - Oct 14, 1066)

Anglo-Saxon rule came to an end in 1066, soon after the death of Edward the Confessor, who had no heir. He had supposedly willed the kingdom to William of Normandy, but also seemed to favour Harold Godwinson as his successor.

Harold was crowned king immediately after Edward died, but he failed in his attempt to defend his crown, when William and an invading army crossed the Channel from France to claim it for himself. Harold was defeated by the Normans at the Battle of Hastings in October 1066, and thus a new era was ushered in.

Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms (650-800)

1. Kent, settled by the Jutes. Ethelbert of Kent was the first Anglo-Saxon king to be converted to Christianity, by St Augustine around 595 AD.

2. Mercia, whose best-known ruler, Offa, built Offa's Dyke along the border between Wales and England. This large kingdom stretched over the Midlands.

3. Northumbria, where the monk Bede (c. 670-735) lived and wrote his Ecclesiastical History of Britain.

4. East Anglia, made up of Angles: the North Folk (living in modern Norfolk) and the South Folk (living in Suffolk). The Sutton Hoo ship burial was found in East Anglia (see below).

5. Essex (East Saxons). Here the famous Battle of Maldon was fought against the Vikings in 991.

6. Sussex: the South Saxons settled here.

7. Wessex (West Saxons), later the kingdom of King Alfred, the only English king ever to have been called ‘the Great', and his equally impressive grandson, Athelstan, the first who could truly call himself ‘King of the English'.

By 850 AD the seven kingdoms had been consolidated into three large Anglo-Saxon kingdoms: Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex. The Anglo-Saxons had become a Christian people.

Key concepts

- Invasion
- Settlement
- Heathens
- Christianity
- Monastic life
- Kingdom
- Chronicle
- English

Conclusion

The Anglo-Saxon period stretched over 600 years, from 410 to 1066. Firstly there were Germanic People and then evaded by The Normans in the Battle of Hastings. And in this era English keeps on growing day by day in religious and other formats. Then Anglo-Norman's era started.