

Old English Period Authors (450-1066)

The Old English period, also known as the Anglo-Saxon period, spans from approximately 450 CE to 1066 CE. This era saw the development of the earliest recorded English literature, primarily in the form of epic poetry, religious verse, and historical chronicles. Most works from this period were preserved in manuscripts written by monks and clerics, as literacy was largely confined to religious institutions.

Caedmon (c. 657-684)

Life

Caedmon was an Anglo-Saxon herdsman who lived in the 7th century and became a significant religious poet. According to the Venerable Bede's "Ecclesiastical History of the English People," Caedmon was originally unable to sing or compose verse. One night, after leaving a feast because of his embarrassment at being unable to sing, he had a dream in which he was asked to sing about "the beginning of created things." Miraculously, he found himself able to compose verses praising God. After this divine inspiration, he became a monk at the monastery of Whitby under Abbess Hild.

Works

- **Caedmon's Hymn:** His only surviving work, a nine-line poem praising God as the creator of heaven and earth. It is considered the oldest surviving Old English poem.
- According to Bede, Caedmon composed many other religious poems on biblical themes, but none of these have survived.

Contribution to English Literature

- Recognized as the first known English poet whose work still survives
- Pioneered the adaptation of Germanic oral tradition to Christian themes
- Demonstrated that vernacular Old English could be used for sacred subjects, previously reserved for Latin
- His work represents the beginning of Christian poetry in English
- Established a tradition of religious verse that influenced subsequent Old English poetry

Cynewulf (fl. 9th century)

Life

Very little is known about Cynewulf's life. Scholars believe he was an educated cleric or monk who lived in the 9th century, possibly in Mercia or Northumbria. Unlike most Old English poets, he signed his works by embedding his name as runic signatures within the poems.

Works

Four poems are attributed to Cynewulf based on his runic signatures:

- **Elene:** A poem about Saint Helena's discovery of the True Cross
- **The Fates of the Apostles:** A brief martyrology of the Twelve Apostles
- **Juliana:** A poem about the martyrdom of Saint Juliana
- **Christ II (The Ascension):** Part of a trilogy on Christ's Ascension

Contribution to English Literature

- One of the few named poets from the Old English period
- Developed sophisticated religious poetry that combined Germanic heroic traditions with Christian themes
- Advanced the use of allegory and symbolism in Old English verse
- Demonstrated exceptional craftsmanship in poetic structure and language
- His signed works provide important evidence for authorship practices in early medieval literature

King Alfred the Great (849-899)

Life

Alfred was King of Wessex from 871 to 899 and is the only English monarch to be accorded the epithet "the Great." Born in Wantage, Berkshire, he was the youngest son of King Æthelwulf. Alfred successfully defended his kingdom against Viking invasions and implemented significant administrative, military, and educational reforms. He was known for his wisdom, piety, and commitment to learning.

Works

- **Translations:** Alfred personally translated several important Latin works into Old English:
 - Boethius's "Consolation of Philosophy"
 - Pope Gregory I's "Pastoral Care"
 - St. Augustine's "Soliloquies"
 - The first fifty psalms of the Psalter

- **The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle:** While not personally written by Alfred, he commissioned this important historical record
- **Alfred's Law Code:** A compilation and reformation of existing laws

Contribution to English Literature

- Promoted literacy and education by translating key Latin texts into Old English
- Established a court school and encouraged learning throughout his kingdom
- His translations often included original additions and commentaries, showing his intellectual engagement
- Standardized West Saxon dialect, which became the dominant form of written Old English
- Preserved crucial classical and religious texts during a period of cultural instability
- Laid the foundation for prose writing in English
- His educational program helped ensure the survival of English literary culture during the Viking invasions