

The Old English Period- History of English Literature

Generated: Jan 26, 2026

The Old English Period (450-1066)

The Beginning of the Old English Period (Anglo-Saxon Period):

The Old English Period is also called the Anglo-Saxon Period. It lasted from 450 to 1066 A.D. This period began when three Germanic tribes came to England. They were the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons. They came from present-day Germany around 449 A.D. They defeated the local Celtic tribes. Then, they started ruling different parts of the land. A famous monk named Bede wrote about this event. He was a teacher and writer. The period ended in 1066 A.D. In that year, the Normans came from France. They defeated the Anglo-Saxons at the Battle of Hastings. This ended Anglo-Saxon rule in England. It started a new period under Norman rule.

The Epic Poem *Beowulf* and Its Significance: This period is very important in English history. It gave birth to the first English literature. The most famous work from this time is *Beowulf*. It is an epic poem written in Old English. We do not know the name of the poet. The poem has more than 3,000 lines. It tells the story of a brave hero named Beowulf. He fights the monster Grendel. Then he kills Grendel's mother. At the end, he dies while killing a fire-breathing dragon. The poem shows values like bravery, honour, and loyalty. It also shows the struggle between good and evil. It helps us understand the life and culture of the Anglo-Saxon people.

Two Types of Poetry - Pagan and Christian: There were two kinds of poetry at this time. **One was pagan poetry.** The word "pagan" comes from the Latin word *paganus*. It first meant a villager. Later, Christians used this word for people who did not follow Christianity. Pagans believed in many gods. They worshipped nature, animals, and spirits. So, early poetry often talked about warriors, battles, fate, and nature. *Beowulf* is an example. **The other was Christian poetry.** It praised God and told Bible stories. It taught faith and Christian values. Caedmon and Cynewulf wrote this kind. Christian poetry grew as people accepted Christianity.

Caedmon- The First English Christian Poet: One early poet of this time was **Caedmon**. He lived in the 7th century. He worked at a monastery in Whitby. At first, he was an uneducated man. Then, one night, he had a dream. In the dream, he received the gift of poetry. After that, he started writing religious poems in English. He praised God and told Bible stories in simple

verses. His most famous work is *Caedmon's Hymn* (871). Only a small part of his work remains. But Caedmon is remembered as the first English Christian poet.

Also Read: [Bengali Summary of The Old English Period](#)

Cynewulf- A Religious Poet with a Name: Another famous poet was **Cynewulf**. He lived in the 8th or 9th century. We do not know much about his life. But he signed his poems using runic letters. Thus, we know his name. Cynewulf wrote religious poems. His poems showed deep faith and strong feelings. His famous works include *Juliana*, *Elene*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, and *Christ II*. He is one of the few named poets from this time. His writing is simple, powerful, and full of Christian ideas.

King Alfred the Great and His Literary Contributions: One great king of this period was **King Alfred the Great**. He ruled the kingdom of Wessex. He is remembered for his bravery and wisdom. He fought against the Vikings and saved his kingdom. He also loved learning. He started schools and helped education grow. He translated important Latin books into English. This helped people understand them better. He translated works like *Pastoral Care*, *Consolation of Philosophy*, and others. He also helped start the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Because of all this, he is called "The Father of English Prose."

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle - A Historical Record: The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is a very important book. It tells the history of England from 449 to 1154 A.D. It was written in 890 A.D. Many different writers added to it over time. The Chronicle tells us about kings, battles, and major events. There are several versions from different places like Winchester and Canterbury. It helps us understand early English history. It also shows how the English language developed.

Important Features of the Old English Period

- Most of the literary works are anonymous.
- Paganism dominates the spirit of the time.
- Christianity is also found in many works.
- Strong belief in fate (called "wyrd") is shown.
- Evil is often symbolized by monsters.
- Romantic love is absent.
- Women are respected, shown in a noble way.

- Sea adventures, war, and heroic acts are praised.
- Metaphors are used more than similes.
- Alliteration is the main poetic device. All alliterative syllables are stressed.
- Kennings (compound words, like “whale-road” stands for sea) are used instead of simple words.
- Lines often have uneven syllables.
- End rhyme is not used.

Remarkable Literary Works of the Old English Period

- **Beowulf** (Author: Anonymous): It is the first and greatest epic in English. It tells the story of a hero named Beowulf.
- **The Wanderer** (Author: Anonymous): It is a sad poem about a warrior who lost his lord and friends.
- **The Seafarer** (Author: Anonymous): It tells about the hard life of a sailor and his thoughts about God.
- **The Husband's Message** (Author: Anonymous): A short love poem. A husband sends a message to his wife.
- **The Wife's Lament** (Author: Anonymous): A sorrowful poem. A woman is separated from her husband.
- **The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle** (Author: Many monks and scholars): It is the first prose in English. It tells the history of England from 449 to 1154 A.D.