

ANGLO-SAXON CULTURE

History:

When Rome was weakening early in the fifth century c.e., troops in the outlying regions, including the British Isles, were withdrawn. Walls, roads, and baths remain even now. They also left the native Celts and Celtic-speaking Britons somewhat christianized, and Picts and Scots in the north, but "political" power fell to unstable tribal units. One of these leaders, Vortigern, "invited" Angles, Saxons, and Jutes to join his military power, so the land saw a swell of invasions by Jutes -- a germanic tribe from Denmark -- in 449, followed soon by Angles and Saxons. (The current name originates as "Angle-Land.") These hordes settled in and pushed the Celts into Cornwall, Wales, Ireland, and to the north. King Arthur grew from legends of one Celtic chieftain who held out better than most.

The Anglo-Saxon social structure consisted of tribal units led by chieftains ("kings," or "lords") who, theoretically at least, earned their respect from their warriors (or "retainers," or "thanes," the group being called a "comitatus"). Kings should display the heroic ideal and be known for an extraordinary and courageous feat or for success in war, all preceded by some boasting. The king must be a generous "ring-giver" too -- that is, he must dish out the spoils of war to his thanes rather than hoard the treasures won in tribal warfare (a practice that has survived in diluted form, says Tom Garbaty, with the Queen giving medals to the Beatles and such). These weapons and treasures are important too. The craftsmanship is always elaborate and stories accrue about each thing. Although theoretically the thanes freely agreed to join a king, it was nevertheless vital for one's sense of self to be part of a tribe. The thane shouldn't survive the king, and the worst fate for these people was to be exiled or to outlast all one's fellow warriors. The sense of identity came from the warrior community.

Fighting was a way of life, and not to avenge the death of a family member was a social disgrace, so endlessly intricate blood-feuds generated perpetual excuses for going to war. The two alternatives for ending a blood-feud were 1) paying "wergild" -- the man price, or 2) arranging a marriage. Women were known as "cup-bearers" (because they served the mead) and "peace-weavers" (because of this function whereby feuds could be ended). But none of this really ever worked. The germanic tribes hated peace; fighting was more honorable.

Occasionally some tribes temporarily grouped together for a larger war task, or against Viking invaders, but there was no national unity or any Round Table in these early years. Alfred the Great and Athelstan made names for themselves as successful against the Norse.

In 597 St. Augustine was sent by Pope Gregory the Great (Mr. Chant) to convert the Anglo-Saxons. Writing came in only with Christianity, and the Latin alphabet ousted the crude germanic runes. In general, churchmen were anxious to eliminate pagan stories, so *Beowulf* is

quite unusual. Edwin, King of Northumbria, converted to Christianity in 627. Laws started to be written. The Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* emerges in 731.

Alfred the Great in the late 800s united the tribes somewhat successfully against the Norse and was a patron of literature -- a political maneuver, since language and literature help form a national identity. Latin works were translated into Old English, including Bede; the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* were begun (and lasted to the mid-12th century); and works were preserved through copyings (such as *Beowulf*).

Language and Style:

Old English is not uniform. It consists of various dialects, but literature needs to treat it as a language. We get our syntax from the Anglo-Saxons, our preference for and greater ease with nouns, the tendencies to simplify grammar and shorten words, and the "law of recessive accent" - the tendency to place the accent on the first syllable and to slur over subsequent syllables. (Later words adopted from outside illustrate: "quantité" is anglicanized to "quántity"; "contraire" to "contrary.")

The Anglo-Saxon gods lend their names to days of the week: Tuesday from Tiw, the dark god; Wednesday from Woden, the war god; Thursday from Thor, the thunder god; Friday from Frigga, goddess of the home.

Most Anglo-Saxon poetry emerges from an oral tradition and was meant for mead-hall entertainment. Scops (the poets) and Gleemen (harpists) sung or recited and were the only historians of the time. The poetic structure was based on accent and alliteration (not rhyme and meter), and made use of stock formulae.

Epithets were useful for alliteration, so God could be called "Weard" (guardian) or "Meatod" (measurer) or "Wuldor-Fæder" (glory-father) or "Drihten" (lord) or "Scyppend" (creator) or "Frea" (master), etc. A king could be a "ring-giver" or a "noble lord" or a "righteous guardian." A phrase replaces a simpler name.

Appositions show up as several epithets in a row, and we're even more top-heavy with noun-phrases.

Kennings were poetic phrases consisting of compound metaphors. The sea could be called "the swan's road" or "the whale's way." As mentioned above, women were "cup-bearers" or "peace-weavers."

Litotes refers to ironic understatement, another apparent favorite trope of the Anglo-Saxons in which the affirmative is expressed by the negation of its contrary. "Not easily did I come through it with my life."

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